Bollywood as a Site of Resistance: Women and Agency in Indian Popular Culture

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Abstract

This article evaluates the contemporary Indian redefinition of gender norms, subjectivity, and practices by analyzing Bollywood films as a major influence upon its global audiences. This study explores how Indian cinema redefines women's status and promotes gender-neutral entertainment by harnessing the powerful energies of current movements such as #MeToo. The article closely examines the textual and conceptual features of current women-focused movies like *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga* (2019), *Thappad* (2020), and *Paglait* (2021). This examination focuses on key insights from popular Bollywood actresses' critical feminist roles to understand their assertions of women's power, agency, and equality. Additionally, this research explores the evolving trope of the male liberator, who dominated past Bollywood and the popular culture imagination but is now being revised in a way that deconstructs patriarchal norms. This paper first explores traditional portrayals of women in Bollywood and then critiques these films to look at how resistance is portrayed in contemporary cinema. This paper examines current paradigm shifts through the analysis of characters that challenge conventional depictions and resist the prevailing gender stereotypes in their quest for empowerment.

Keywords: Indian women, Agency, Resistance, Bollywood, Indian cinema, Masculinity, Gendered Subjectivity

Introduction

Over the course of its seven-decade history, Bollywood has portrayed female lead characters in a spectrum of characterizations, encompassing the archetypal selfless mother, the stereotype of a helpless damsel, and the portrayal of women who assert agency over their own lives. These depictions offer insight into the multidimensionality of women's experiences and identities. Bollywood's portrayal of women has long been a source of debate among academics, and the broader argument is geared at the patriarchal gaze's predominance and the subjugation of women resulting in them being placed in peripheral and secondary roles. Women have traditionally played supporting roles and are frequently depicted as subordinate to or dependent upon male characters. Female characters are usually stunning, beloved, obedient wives and/or compassionate mothers whose only objectives are to either be the catalyst for the hero's character change and branching storyline or to be a lovely visual distraction from the action (Ganti, 2004, p. 190; Moini, 2011, p. 145).

In *Producing Bollywood*, Tejasvini Ganti highlights the societal, intellectual, and political foundations of Bollywood movies that promote the desire of the Indian middle class to celebrate patriarchy, the Hindu joint family system, and the chastity of women. She claims, "Bollywood has

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mainly a male-dominated culture, and men characters are offered considerably more significance than women roles" (Ganti, 2012, p. 187). The Indian film business is one of the top annual makers of films and serves the largest global diaspora audience (Dwyer, 2006). Thus, such depictions of women characters on this extremely powerful platform reinforce cultural and ideological views on women's agency while navigating the demands of social and political-economic development. Films represent the most highly influential medium of entertainment for the majority of the Indian population (Srinivas, 2002). This reinforcement through popular influence is what Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2009) calls the "Cinema Effect" (p. 107), which refers to the vast influence and exposure of the cinema and cultural industry that influences, defines, and redefines many facets of life. In this context, Rajadhyaksha asserts that:

> The ability of the cinema to produce a recognizable "reality" thus includes a narrative ability to enable transactions across symbolic registers. Further, these registers are at one level public symbolic formations, such as those constituting the paraphernalia of the state apparatus, but at other, more elusive levels, also structures designed to produce specialized conditions for the production of an objectivity that primarily underscores an authorizing gaze (Rajadhyaksha, 2009, p. 94).

And according to George Gerbner, "Media use can cultivate attitudes and beliefs about social issues, including gender roles and expectations" (1976, p. 174). Thus, movies have been a crucial medium for communicating social insights and situations while continuing to serve as a significant kind of entertainment for the masses.

As Albert Bandura discussed in *Social Learning Theory* (1977), individuals learn from observing others, including actions displayed in media. This means that the representation of women in films can significantly reinforce stereotypes and cultural attitudes, which can impact women's well-being and opportunities (Bandura, 1977). Such portrayals of women in cinema, especially Bollywood, perpetuate and normalize misogynistic attitudes and women's existence in ongoing Indian culture. Bollywood film viewership spans across demographics, where the beliefs presented in the films become cemented in the Indian psyche and frequently influence popular opinions and perceptions (Mishra, 2013). As Daryl Bem's "Self-Perception" theory states, "The way people perceive women to be represented in media can influence their attitudes towards women" (1972, p. 185). This idea highlights the significant role that filmmakers play in shaping cultural attitudes and beliefs through the way they portray women in their films. Socially responsible cinema must be created to promote women's agency and showcase transformed women characters, as this can contribute to the advancement of gender equality.

Indian films have long been the subject of hierarchical orientation and patriarchal domination through the portrayal of masculinity as superior and women as inferior and submissive. But newer aspects of breaking cultural stereotypes, emancipating women characters, and transforming ideals of positive masculinity need to be unveiled and brought into the mainstream of global international affairs. The #MeToo movement has had a significant impact on women's agency in Bollywood films by raising awareness about sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the industry. In the wake of these movements, Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra stated, "Women in the entertainment industry have been talking about these issues for a long time, but it's only now that people are actually listening and taking notice" (Chopra, 2018). Screenwriter and director Ava DuVernay also commented on the impact of the movements, saying, "Women's stories are finally being elevated and prioritized in ways they haven't been before, and

that's largely due to the #MeToo and Time's Up movements" (DuVernay, 2019). These movements led to a shift in the representation of women in films, with more nuanced and empowering roles being written for women characters.

According to Ahad and Akgul, "Over the past ten or so years, there has been an increase in Bollywood films featuring women due to the country's expanding public conversation on women" (2020). The thematic shift to focus on women's agency, embodiment, and the battle for empowerment and transformation can observed in *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Gulab Gang (2014), Parched (2016), Kahani (2012), Mary Kom (2014), Mardaani (2014), English Vinglish (2012), The Dirty Picture (2011), Angry Indian Goddesses (2015), Queen (2014), Margarita with a Straw (2015), Pink (2016),* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha (2017)*. However, certain films featuring women in leading parts with a "strong presence on screen" have been noted to have appeared in previous decades, as addressed by Gopalan (1997), but the narrative of these films often displayed women as victims of violence or timid weak characters in need of uplifting (p. 34).

Considering the recent research boom on this topic, there is more of an imperative to examine how recent Indian films redefine women's status and agency while fostering gender-neutral entertainment. According to Nijhawan (2009), this marks the entry of a "new woman" in the Bollywood industry (p. 107). The explication of the New Woman deviates from Bollywood's earlier frameworks of women as sufferers of victimization, objects of desire, dutiful, and marginalized. Now there is a blending of polarized personality characteristics, a fusion of local and traditional with global notions of "individuality and independence" (Nijhawan, 2009, p. 107). This study offers a critical analysis of how resistance is portrayed in contemporary Bollywood movies on power, agency, and gender equality.

A detailed analysis is necessary to comprehend the narrative and discursive methods employed in films, as well as the creation of women characters affirming their status and combating the male-dominated cultural gaze in their pursuit of empowerment and transformation. To accomplish this, we chose three recent women-centric successes, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga* (2019), *Thapad* (2020), and *Paglait* (2021), for a close textual and discursive analysis. Each of these films represent strong women and address the subject of female embodiment, such as sexuality in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga*, violence in *Thapad*, and widowhood in *Paglait.* The films highlight discourses that defy conventional depictions by resisting prevalent gender stereotypes. Employing concepts from theorists of cinema and culture, we examine the evolving character of gender dynamics in Bollywood cinema. The article is further split into three sections, each of which provides a detailed examination of the film and its underlying subject of women's agency, along with much-needed examples of male characters in the film who encourage women's empowerment.

Transcending Cultural Repression of Female Sexuality in *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga*

Bollywood has a tendency of reinforcing traditional cultural and ideological views on women's sexuality while navigating economic demands for profit. Traditionally, sexual identity—especially homosexuality—was concealed on screen. This has changed over the past ten years, and lately, there have been a few movies that show same-sex relationships in a more inclusive manner. Mainstream movies often depict male same-sex desire, but they do so by erasing the presence of women. Consequently, there is limited room for feminist plotlines. This can be seen as a form of marginalization, as it diminishes the representation and visibility of women in media. In "Where are all the Lesbian Love Stories Bollywood?", Debiparna Chakraborty (2017) contends that, "With each passing year, the Bollywood film industry has aggressively improved its image of

homosexual males yet, with the exception of a few, lesbian participation in films is rare and retrograde." Thus, heteronormativity and patriarchy play a role in society's intolerance of lesbian women, often manifesting itself in the forms of violence and censorship.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of Bollywood films depicting women claiming their sexuality in a transformed and empowered way. These films have been instrumental in challenging traditional societal norms and stereotypes surrounding women's sexuality and have helped pave the way for greater representation and visibility for women in the Indian film industry. As bell hooks states in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, "the first act of resistance for women who are sexually oppressed is to self-recover their sexuality" (2000, p. 15). This sentiment is echoed in the growing number of Bollywood films that feature women taking control of their own sexuality as they refuse to be confined by societal expectations and norms. Similarly, as queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, "sexuality is a site of ongoing social construction" (1990, p.1). The representation of women claiming their sexuality in Bollywood films is not only a reflection of the changing attitudes towards women's sexuality in Indian society, but it is also actively helping to shape and construct these attitudes. Films like *Unfreedom*, *Girlfriend*, *Fire*, *Margarita with a Straw*, *Dedh Ishqiya*, *Sheer Qorma*, and *Angry Indian Goddesses* have portrayed lesbian relationships and female sexuality in a way that has not been seen before in Bollywood. This helps to break down stereotypes and push for greater acceptance and understanding of women's sexuality. As Deakin and Bhugra (2012) suggest:

> In recent decades, portrayals of female sexuality have undergone a significant transformation, in addition to changes in family views around sexuality, sexual behaviour, and alternative sexualities. Female sexuality has matured from repressed, submissive characteristics to forceful, extroverted, and demanding ones (p. 37).

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga, directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar, investigates the challenges of same-sex relationships in small-town India through the story of a woman struggling with her sexuality in a culture that represses it. Sweety, the protagonist of the film played by Sonam Kapoor, is a queer woman living in a small village with her conventional family. Kuhu, portrayed by Regina Cassandra, is the object of Sweety's desire. Their love is fostered in secrecy due to the lack of social acceptance and recognition for same-sex relationships in their culture. Sweety is not only struggling to come to terms with her sexuality but also with the societal norms and expectations that try to repress it. *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* is an attempt at normalizing everyone who is not normal (Bhattacharya, 2019).

Sahil Mirza, portrayed by Rajkummar Rao, is a dramatist from Delhi who has been infatuated with Sweety from the first time he saw her and pursues her to Punjab where he discovers her tightly held secret. When Sweety tells Sahil that her only alternatives are to kill herself or go to another country, it showcases some of the very tough situations that some LGBTQ people have to navigate. As Indian queer studies theorist R. Raj Rao states, "queer desire is always already a desire for a homecoming, a return to the mother, and a desire to (re)create family" (2007, p. 130). This film illustrates the desire of queer individuals to belong and be accepted in their homes and communities, particularly for women, who face double marginalization for their gender and sexual identity in these scenarios.

In the film, the characters engage in dialogues that specifically address and debunk many prevalent myths about homosexuality. For example, in one scene, Sweety's father says, "This is

not a disease that needs to be cured," when referring to her daughter's sexuality, thereby challenging the notion that homosexuality is an illness (Dhar, 2019). In another scene, Sweety's brother dismisses the idea that being gay is an import from the West, saying "This is not something new that's come from outside, it's always been here" (Dhar, 2019). Furthermore, the movie also highlights the struggles that gay and lesbian individuals face while growing up. Through flashbacks, the movie portrays the struggles that Sweety faced as a young girl, hiding in her diaries, internalizing shame about her sexuality, and deciding to live a constrained life. These scenes portray extremely relevant queer experiences of growing up and coming to terms with the fact that homosexuality is culturally stigmatized and considered abnormal. This portrayal in the movie aligns with the theory of social constructionism which argues that "sexual orientation and gender identity are not fixed, biologically determined characteristics, but rather are constructed by societal norms and dominant cultural ideals" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 123). The movie's depiction of Sweety's struggles with her sexuality and the societal pressure to conform to heteronormative ideals highlights the ways in which these societal constructions can negatively impact individuals who do not conform to them.

In contrast, by placing the story in a small village and portraying Sweety as the *sundar-susheel* archetype of the visually appealing, ideal Indian girl, the movie challenges preconceived notions about how lesbian women must appear. Giti Chandra in *Queer Desires and the Erotics of Indian Cinema* argues that "queer desire is an act of resistance against dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality, and for the subversion of heteronormativity" (Chandra, 2020, p. 44). The film actively works towards subverting heteronormative ideals and challenging societal norms and stereotypes surrounding women's sexuality in India. Saibal Chatterjee (2019) notes of the film that "it does not seek to derive mirth and frivolity from the theme, offering instead an earnest, unapologetic depiction of the act of coming out in a conservative society."

The movie also touches on the idea of unrequited love through the character of Sahil Mirza who defies societal norms and expectations of masculinity by choosing to support Sweety in her precarious journey, rather than succumbing to the feelings of rejection. This portrayal of unrequited love in Bollywood serves as a positive example for men, as it challenges the idea that men should react to rejection with aggression and violence. Instead, the film showcases a transformed version of contemporary Indian men. For instance, Sahil says, "I'm not going to let you go through this alone, I'll be with you in every step of the way" (Dhar, 2019). This dialogue showcases Sahil's support and reinforces the idea that men can and must be supportive allies for women. Sahil says, "I know it's hard for you to accept yourself, but it's even harder for me to accept that you don't want to be with me" (Dhar, 2019). This dialogue showcases his emotional maturity and understanding of unrequited love and its complexities. In Indian culture, there is often a link between traditional notions of masculinity and incidents of sexual violence and harassment. This is because such ideas promote a sense of entitlement and control over women's bodies, which can lead to the justification of violence against women. Sahil's character serves as a counterexample to this harmful narrative, as he chooses to support Sweety and respect her choices, rather than seeking to control or violate her. The character of Sahil serves as an example of how men can actively work to challenge and dismantle traditional notions of masculinity by being supportive and understanding towards women's struggles. This aligns with the ideas of masculinity proposed by R. W. Connell in *Masculinities* (1995) where he argues that there are multiple forms of masculinity, and that men have the agency to adopt a more positive and equitable form of masculinity (p. 56). The trope of the male liberator has been prevalent in traditional literature and media for centuries yet is undergoing revision. This character was typically a heroic and often

hypermasculine man who saves women from harm, usually using physical force or violence. However, this trope reinforces patriarchal ideals by perpetuating the idea that women are helpless and need to be rescued by men. In recent years, the term male liberator has been redefined to refer to a man who actively works towards dismantling oppressive systems and promoting gender equality. This new version of the trope is non-patriarchal and seeks to challenge traditional gender roles and power dynamics. Thus, Sahil's persona takes the shape of a male liberator who not only stands with a woman battling for her sexuality and lifestyle choices, but also serves as an example for men to shatter the chains of misogyny and advance the principles of gender equality.

A Slap on the Face of Patriarchy: Encroaching the Boundaries of Marital Equality in *Thappad*

In Indian marriages, patriarchal ideology institutionalizes male privilege which perpetuates an unequal, gendered distribution of power and agency. This is in line with the definition of patriarchy put forth by Bhasin, who relates it to "male dominance, to the power dynamics by which men rule women, and to characterize a system by which women are kept submissive in a variety of ways" (1993, p. 3). Additionally, the patriarchal tradition is also reflected in the emphasis on the bride's virginity and the expectation that she will be submissive to her husband, as stated by Mukherjee (1989), "In India, marriage is viewed as a social and cultural institution that reinforces patriarchal values and reinforces the idea that men have the power to control women's sexuality" (p. 45). Moreover, the patriarchal tradition is also reflected in the fact that the bride's family must give the groom's family a large amount of money, gold, and other gifts, which reinforces the idea that women are a commodity to be bought and sold (Chakravarty, 1994, p. 23). As a result, Indian marriages are heavily influenced by patriarchal values and traditions where men exercise authority and women are marginalized and treated as objects owned by men.

The role of Bollywood in reinforcing the objectification of women has been a surging topic as the industry reflects the patriarchal values present in Indian society through its portrayal of women. Such films certainly mirror Indian culture and gender roles as Stuart Hall asserts: "Representation is never neutral; it always carries meaning, values, and ideologies that reflect dominant cultural attitudes and beliefs" (1980, p. 121).

In earlier Bollywood movies, even if the woman was positioned as the main character as mother, daughter, or wife, "The woman retained her intellect and elegance while adjusting to her husband's expectations" (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 11). This has led to a lack of representation of gender equality and a reinforcement of patriarchal attitudes in earlier Bollywood films. In this context, Nidhi Tere remarks:

> The interest in films taken by feminists stems from concern about the under- representation and misrepresentation of women in cinema. It adopts a critical approach towards gender bias on celluloid. The feminist approach to cinema asks a few pertinent questions like how women are represented on screen, how women's issues are treated in cinema, what does feminism mean to film-makers, how does the feminist agenda manifest on screen, how is the women character positioned compared to the male character and what is the role of women filmmakers and women writers in depicting women's issues through cinema (2012, p. 32).

Similarly, the concept of the "male gaze" put forward by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" discusses the power dynamics present in media representation, where

women are often reduced to passive objects of desire to be looked at by a heterosexual male viewer. It also implies that the patriarchal power structure is reinforced through the way that women are represented in media (Mulvey, 1975, p. 16). The positive reception of these films can be seen as a step towards challenging and subverting the traditional patriarchal representations in Bollywood and creating a more equal and diverse representation of women on screen.

While Bollywood has traditionally been criticized for promoting gender bias and objectifying women, there has been a transformation towards showcasing strong and independent women characters in recent years. Films such as *Piku* (2015), *Neerja* (2016), *Queen* (2014), and *Kahaani* (2012) have featured women leads with agency. This change can be attributed to a more diverse group of writers and viewers, as well as a shift in societal attitudes towards gender representation. Bollywood's pervasive misogynist culture is being challenged by a growing audience of women, a new generation of performers and directors, and the mobilization of advocacy groups which is exemplified by the new wave of women-centric movies (Zinck, 2019, p. 12). One of the best instances of this genre of films, which utterly dismantles the traditional, constricting ideals of womanhood, is the Anubhav Sinha-directed film *Thappad* (*thappad* meaning slap in English). The film is a harsh slap on the long-standing customs and expectations of women connected with Indian marriages. *Thappad* follows the life of the main heroine Amrita (Taapsee Pannu), who abandoned all her goals and limited herself to a fictitious, blissful marriage with her spouse Vikram (Pavail Gulatti). This film serves as a powerful critique of the traditional, restrictive ideals of womanhood in Indian society. A slap is the film's central event, which serves as a catalyst for Amrita's realization of the unfair treatment and limitation of agency she has experienced within the institution of marriage. The character's dramatic transformation from a submissive, compliant figure to a woman who demands respect and autonomy represents a subversion of traditional binary gender norms and societal expectations placed on women in Indian marriages.

Following that single slap, Amrita's entire universe and the perspective through which she saw her marriage undergoes tremendous upheaval. Amrita considers the significance of the slap as she states, "Everyone says, 'it's just a slap.' You know what that slap did? Suddenly I became aware of all the unfair things...I had learned to accept. What's expected of me is that I move on from the unfair" (Sinha, 2020). This portrays the slap as a violation not only of Amrita's physical body, but also her agency and self-respect. This dialogue highlights how societal expectations for women to overlook and move on from such mistreatment perpetuates a cycle of abuse. As the husband remarks, "You are aware of my poor mood. You are aware of my struggles. Go if you want to make a huge deal out of this" (Sinha, 2020). This dialogue portrays how the husband's reaction to Amrita's decision to leave the house is an attempt to justify his actions and further undermine Amrita's agency. This is in line with the theory of power-control which suggests that intimate partner violence occurs to assert power and control over one's partner. As Michael Johnson states, "Intimate terrorism is a systematic pattern of power and control characterized by ongoing emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and economic abuse" (1995, p. 2). The film illustrates how the husband's actions align with this theory, as he uses violence to assert control over Amrita and maintain the power imbalance in their relationship. He considers his own struggles to be more significant than the harm caused to Amrita. Through Amrita's journey, viewers see how an act of physical violence can become a catalyst for the protagonist to understand the dynamics of power and control within a marriage where a wife is an object rather than a subject with agency and self-respect.

The film not only explores the experiences of the main character Amrita, but also delves into the lives of Sunita and Netra who represent different aspects of women's experience that are

shaped by their different class backgrounds. Sunita, a domestic worker, is portrayed as a victim of domestic abuse who is not even aware of her own rights and individuality as a woman. This highlights the ways in which societal norms and expectations of class and occupation can lead to a lack of understanding of one's own rights, particularly for women in lower socio-economic positions. Furthermore, it illustrates the ways in which domestic abuse can be normalized and accepted in lower socio-economic communities, as Sunita does not even consider leaving her abuser. Sunita's character aligns with the theory of intersectionality, which posits that individuals' experiences of oppression are shaped by their intersecting identities such as class, race, and gender. According to Kimberle Crenshaw, "The intersectionality paradigm recognizes that people have multiple identities and that the discrimination and disadvantages they experience are usually co-constructed, resulting from the interaction of these multiple identities" (1989, p. 140). On the other hand, Netra is depicted as a successful lawyer who fights for the rights of women but struggles with her own self. Netra represents the struggles faced by women in positions of power who are trying to reconcile their professional and personal identities. Furthermore, her dialogue with Amrita, "Every relationship is flawed. So best mend it," illustrates the ways in which even those who specialize in women's rights can hold misconceptions about domestic violence due to the societal expectations of gender roles and marriage which shape their understanding of the issue (Sinha, 2020). Overall, the characters Sunita, Netra and Amrita highlight the complexities of women's precarious experiences of inequality and violence in marriage and how these experiences are shaped by societal norms, expectations, and class positions. The film serves as a powerful critique of these societal norms and their impact on women's lives.

In the current climate, films like *Thappad* are immensely significant. The film reinterprets how gender is defined in Indian marital relationships and criticizes the long-standing patriarchal customs of Indian marriages. The portrayal of domestic violence victims and their silence deepens audiences' understanding of gender-related concerns. In addition to stressing the significance of gender equality, the film challenges the notion of normalizing gender stereotypes. As Raquel Kennedy Bergen, a theorist of gendered violence, states, "Gendered violence is a societal problem that is perpetuated by the ways in which gender roles and expectations are taught, reinforced, and upheld by societal norms and institutions" (Bergen, 1996, p. 4).

Unravelling Conventions: Re-claiming Agency Post Widowhood in *Paglait*

A woman in India is blessed if she passes away while still a *sumangali* (married woman), indicating it is preferable for her to pass away while still married as opposed to living as a widow. The sudden death of a spouse is one of the most stressful experiences that can occur in a person's lifetime (Bacon, et.al, 2000), and is particularly distressing if it happens to an Indian woman. A widow is still viewed as unfortunate and a burden, despite the fact that the practice of *Sati*[3] is illegal and customs like making widows wear only white clothing their entire lives and shaving their heads are forbidden. Meera Khanna in *Living Death: Trauma of Widowhood in India,* says that "[t]he widow is 'uglified' to deprive her of the core of her femininity, it is an act symbolic of castration. She is deprived of the red dot between her eyebrows that proclaims her sexual energy" (2002, p.10). This highlights the ways in which widowhood in Indian culture is not just a shift in economic or social status, but also a form of gendered violence. The "uglifying" of widows is a form of symbolic castration aimed at depriving widows of their femininity, sexuality, and agency.

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[3] A historical Hindu practice in which a widow's life is sacrificed after her husband's death to signify the closure of their marriage.

In regard to widowhood in India, Spivak has written about the ways in which widows are often stigmatized and marginalized within Indian society. In her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, she writes, "The widow is the ultimate figure of the 'dislocated' subject; she is the site of the most intense conflict between tradition and modernity" (Spivak, 1999, p. 145). Furthermore, Spivak argues that the treatment of widows in India is closely connected to the patriarchal structures of Indian society. She writes, "The widow is the sign of the failure of patriarchal protection, the failure of the symbolic order that sustains patriarchal society" (Spivak, 1999, p. 164).

On the portrayal of widows, Spivak argues that these representations often reinforce the marginalization of widows in Indian society. She writes, "The literary representation of widowhood in India, for instance, is a representation of the unrepresentable, and therefore a representation of the impossible" (Spivak, 1999, p. 163). This reinforces the marginalization of widows in Indian society through its portrayal of widows as pitiable and helpless figures, rather than strong and independent individuals. Here, one can apply the concept of affect contagion, which is an "automatic process of mimicking and synchronizing the facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements of others, which in turn leads to the synchronization of emotions and moods between individuals. It is a fundamental mechanism of social interaction and plays an important role in communication, empathy, and social influence" (Barsade & Gibson, 2007, p. 136). Thus, the constant depiction of women as weak, passive, and objects of desire can shape societal attitudes and reinforce harmful stereotypes towards women (Clover, 1992; Projansky, 2001).

Bollywood's image of widows has been largely stagnant for decades, but now mainstream Indian film has been moving away from old themes and exploring stories that center on women. They have often been shown as soulless, lifeless people that are perpetually held responsible for all the misfortunes that occur in their life. These depictions don't accomplish anything to alter the gendered ways in which we regard women, except for being wholly unrealistic. The rescue story has been a recurring topic in Hindi films from Shakti Samanta's *Kati Patang* in 1971 up to Ravi Chopra's *Baabul* in 2006. In almost every movie, a hero who represents traditional masculinity saves the white-wrapped woman in need. White sarees or plain clothing are frequently depicted on widows. While it is undeniable that this has been the norm in certain communities in real life as well, displaying it on a large screen subtly normalizes it for viewers worldwide and perpetuates the stereotype that widows are expected to live in such a capacity. The following discussion of movies summarizes the traditional portrayal of widows in Bollywood versus now.

Radha, a quintessential widow woman from the film *Sholay* (1975) played by Jaya Bhaduri-Bachchan, is portrayed as a stereotypical widow oppressed by patriarchal society. Her old white saree, pale dry face, veil, and lack of dialogue in the movie suggests a sheer lack of agency. A romantic relationship between Jai (Principal Hero) and Radha blossoms, but Jai's passing at the climax of the movie shows the unwillingness of the filmmakers to depict a widow's remarriage. *Premrog* (1982) depicts the life of Manorama, who is forced to live the life of a Hindu widow which includes one moderate meal a day, no footwear, plain white attire, and being seen as an omen by the rest of the community. This depiction of widowhood is a representation of age-old Indian customs and traditions. In Deepa Metha's film *Water* (2007), the protagonist Chuhiya (a child bride who has become a widow) barely even remembers her wedding but she is condemned to reside in penitence. The heterogeneity of widowhood is brilliantly captured by water. Chuhiya is told not to feel grief by Madhumati (Manorama), the controlling lady in charge, because she is already half-dead after the death of her husband.

The film *Is Love Enough? Sir* presents the heartwarming story of a young widow Ratna, who leaves her village behind to start afresh in Mumbai. Ratna pursuing her ambition of becoming a fashion designer, dancing courageously in front of an audience, and accepting romance after widowhood provides a radically different viewpoint. She comforts the bereaved Sir of the title that life does not end in the face of grief and hardships. The cinematography from the film *The Last Color* presents the protagonist Noor drenched in color, signifying her liberation and embodiment. The movie exposes and confronts various taboos, stigmas, and conventions that people have concerning widows, the majority of which are unjustified and frozen in time.

In the movie *Paglait* (Crazy), Sandhya is a young widow within an arranged marriage who grieves her husband's death in a non-traditional way. When Sandhya says, "When a woman becomes wise enough, she is labeled as 'crazy' by everyone" (Bist, 2021), it sums up Sandhya's emotionally troubled state of mind, but also makes a caustic comment on the predicament of a young widow in India. As she investigates her husband's life, Sandhya realizes he may not have been faithful, and her family tries to pressure her into remarrying her husband's cousin for the money. Sandhya defies patriarchal expectations by refusing to remarry and give the money to her in-laws, asserting that it's about her autonomy rather than the money. Sandhya's story deviates from the usual widowhood narrative in Bollywood and Indian society. She shows openness and acceptance of her husband's death, rather than the customary wailing and howling sadness. She claims that grief cannot be the same for everyone because we all deal with it differently. As a result, she continues to have a ravenous taste for spicy cuisine, refuses to cry buckets, insists on Pepsi instead of tea from her mother-in-law, and refuses to wear a white saree except at funerals. Sandhya's modest but profound actions of defiance show her agency and resistance to the prevalent standards linked with widowhood and gender. It is remarkable to conclude how Bollywood films have evolved over time, moving away from the notion of men rescuing women from the horrors of widowhood to women taking the lead and gaining agency and selfhood.

The concept of the crazy woman, as the title of the film suggests, can be related to the pathologizing of women who challenge societal norms. In her essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," Bartky writes, "The bodies of women have been subjected to a particularly intense scrutiny and regulation, as have their minds and souls. Women have been told, implicitly and explicitly, what to wear, what to eat, how to sit, how to stand, how to walk, how to talk, and how to think" (1990, p. 56). This type of scrutiny and regulation is a form of patriarchal power that reinforces traditional gender roles and punishes women who deviate from these norms. She writes, "Women who challenge patriarchal norms, for example, by being assertive, aggressive, or independent, are often labeled as 'hysterical,' 'bitchy,' 'castrating,' 'man-hating,' or 'crazy'" (Bartky, 1990, p. 57). In this sense, the title of the film serves as a commentary on the ways in which women are marginalized and stigmatized for challenging patriarchal norms and expectations.

Conclusion

Women, gender, and politics have been central to global consciousness over the last three decades. Research on countries in the Global South, which have been traditionally marginalized and silenced in the geo-cultural structures, has been central to this dimension. As a result, their contribution and relevance to global innovations, movements, and advances are frequently overlooked or underrated. It is therefore vital to conduct studies on Indian cinema, culture, and transformative ideals of women's empowerment. Further, it can be concluded that women's bodies and sexuality continue to be significant social and cultural signifiers in the latest Bollywood film

stories. As women protagonists take on dominant roles, come off as strong and assertive, and appear less as targets of violence, even these transformed women must continue to evolve.

This paper's analysis has primarily focused on these three questions within Bollywood presentations: the portrayal of lesbians, the male-dominated cultural prejudices of violence underlying Indian marriages, and the portrayal of complacent widows vs. widows as normal humans. Analyzing the construction of women characters—including their roles, class, clothing, physiology, agency, plotlines, framing within scenes, and implicit and explicit references to their sexuality—allows insights into the convergence of opposing discourses in these films. It also demonstrates how films may change the way people think about the role of gender in marriage, sexuality, and individual agency as essential factors of womanhood.

These holistic understandings of gender complexities promote the importance of healthy relationships. Therefore, it is evident that movies may alter how Indian society views itself by improving the status of women. As both society and movies can reflect one another, viewers may gain a greater grasp of women's cultural and societal challenges if they see powerful women combating violence and desiring to preserve their agency. Women's narratives are shifting because of recent women-centric films on forbidden issues. This is necessary since the notion that women are only valued as extensions of their male counterparts must be abandoned. The shift in how Indian women are portrayed in film indicates an evolution in their place in society. As this article has demonstrated, understanding Indian women of the past and present and their onscreen avatars requires an approach that is both subtle, nuanced, and multi-dimensional.

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