Rewriting Age and Gender: Representation, Performativity, and Age Politics in *Saand Ki Aankh*

Aparna Sonkar

Research Scholar

Department of English and Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow

Abstract

The representation of women in mainstream Hindi cinema has historically been shaped by patriarchal narratives that limit female agency and visibility. Women characters are frequently confined to domestic roles, romantic subplots, or symbolic embodiments of morality, leaving little room for narratives centered on women's autonomy and self-realization, particularly in later stages of life. The 2019 Hindi film *Saand Ki Aankh*, directed by Tushar Hiranandani, presents a compelling case study within this context. Based on the real-life story of Chandro Tomar and Prakashi Tomar—two elderly women from Johri village in Uttar Pradesh who became competitive sharpshooters in their sixties—the film offers a narrative of late-life empowerment that challenges conventional assumptions about gender and age.

Despite its progressive storyline, the film sparked widespread debate due to its casting decisions. The roles of the elderly protagonists were played by comparatively young actresses, Bhumi Pednekar and Taapsee Pannu, raising questions about representation, ageism, and opportunities for older actresses in the Indian film industry. This paper examines *Saand Ki Aankh* through the theoretical frameworks of feminist film theory, gender performativity, and representation studies. Drawing on the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks, Laura Mulvey, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Edward Said, the study analyzes how the film both challenges patriarchal structures and simultaneously reflects structural inequalities within the film industry.

The paper argues that *Saand Ki Aankh* occupies an ambivalent position within contemporary feminist cinema. While the film foregrounds the resilience and agency of rural elderly women, its production practices reveal persistent biases regarding age and gender representation. By examining narrative themes, cinematic symbolism, and casting controversies, this study contributes to broader discussions about gender politics and representation in Indian popular cinema.

Keywords: Feminist film theory, Bollywood, gender performativity, ageism, representation, Indian cinema

Introduction

Cinema functions as a powerful cultural medium that shapes social perceptions of gender, identity, and power. In India, mainstream Hindi cinema—popularly known as Bollywood—has historically reproduced patriarchal social structures through its narratives and character portrayals. Women in Hindi films have often been represented as passive figures whose identities are defined through their relationships with male protagonists. As Rachel Dwyer observes, traditional Bollywood narratives frequently emphasize male heroism while positioning female characters as symbols of familial virtue or romantic desire (Dwyer).

Within this context, stories centered on women's agency, particularly elderly women, are relatively rare. The film *Saand Ki Aankh* (2019) represents a notable departure from this pattern. Directed by Tushar Hiranandani, the film narrates the remarkable story of Chandro Tomar and Prakashi Tomar, two rural women who achieved national recognition as sharpshooters despite beginning their training in their sixties.

The film's narrative challenges conventional stereotypes about gender and age by portraying elderly rural women as agents of transformation and resistance. However, the film also generated controversy due to its casting choices. Younger actresses Bhumi Pednekar and Taapsee Pannu were cast as the elderly protagonists, prompting criticism from veteran actresses who argued that the roles should have been offered to older performers.

This controversy raises important questions about representation and equality in the film industry. Can a film that celebrates women's empowerment simultaneously perpetuate structural inequalities? How do narrative representation and industrial practices intersect in shaping gender politics in cinema?

To address these questions, this paper analyzes *Saand Ki Aankh* through the theoretical frameworks of feminist film criticism and representation studies. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of gender construction, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Edward Said's analysis of cultural representation, the study examines how the film negotiates the tensions between empowerment and exclusion.

The central argument of this paper is that *Saand Ki Aankh* represents both a progressive step and a structural limitation within contemporary Hindi cinema. While it challenges patriarchal norms through its narrative of female empowerment, its casting decisions reveal persistent inequalities within the film industry.

Literature Review

Feminist film theory emerged during the 1970s as scholars began examining how cinema reflects and reinforces patriarchal power structures. One of the most influential contributions to this field is Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which argues that classical cinema is structured around the "male gaze," a visual regime that positions women as objects of male desire (Mulvey). According to Mulvey, cinematic narratives often privilege male agency while reducing female characters to passive spectacles.

Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of gender in *The Second Sex* provides another crucial theoretical foundation. Beauvoir argues that gender identity is not biologically determined but socially constructed through cultural expectations and socialization. Her famous assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" highlights the cultural processes that shape gender roles (de Beauvoir).

Judith Butler expands this argument through her theory of gender performativity. Butler suggests that gender is not a stable identity but a series of repeated performances governed by social norms (Butler). These performances can either reinforce or challenge dominant gender ideologies.

In the context of Indian cinema, scholars such as Tejaswini Ganti have analyzed how industrial structures influence representation. Ganti's ethnographic study of the Bollywood industry demonstrates that economic considerations often shape casting decisions and narrative themes (Ganti).

Age representation is another significant issue in film studies. Research indicates that opportunities for female actors decline dramatically as they age, while male actors continue to receive leading roles well into later life. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality provides an important framework for understanding these dynamics. Crenshaw argues that systems of inequality—such as gender, race, and age—intersect to produce complex forms of marginalization (Crenshaw).

Edward Said's concept of representation further complicates this discussion. Said argues that cultural representations are shaped by power relations and ideological frameworks rather than functioning as neutral reflections of reality (Said). Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for analyzing how *Saand Ki Aankh* simultaneously challenges and reproduces structures of inequality.

The portrayal of women in Hindi cinema has undergone significant transformations over the decades. Early post-independence films often depicted women as symbols of national morality and sacrifice. For instance, Nargis's role in *Mother India* (1957) established the archetype of the self-sacrificing mother figure who embodies moral strength and resilience.

However, many scholars argue that such representations reinforced traditional gender roles. Ashis Nandy suggests that popular cinema often reflects societal anxieties regarding modernity and gender roles (Nandy). Women characters frequently serve as moral anchors within narratives centered on male protagonists.

Neepa Majumdar further notes that female stardom in Indian cinema has historically been constrained by patriarchal expectations (Majumdar). Even when female characters occupy central narrative positions, their identities are often defined by their relationships with men.

In recent years, however, Bollywood has witnessed the emergence of female-centered narratives that challenge traditional stereotypes. Films such as *Queen* (2014), *Pink* (2016), and *Thappad* (2020) explore themes of female autonomy and resistance.

Within this evolving landscape, *Saand Ki Aankh* stands out for focusing on elderly female protagonists—a demographic rarely represented in mainstream cinema.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a valuable framework for analyzing the protagonists' transformation. Butler argues that gender is constituted through repeated social acts rather than fixed biological traits (Butler).

In the patriarchal society depicted in the film, women are expected to perform roles associated with obedience, modesty, and domesticity. Chandro and Prakashi initially conform to these expectations. However, their participation in competitive shooting disrupts these norms.

By mastering a skill traditionally associated with masculinity, the protagonists challenge the symbolic boundaries between male and female roles. Each act of shooting becomes a performative gesture that destabilizes patriarchal authority.

The visual motif of lifting the ghunghat while aiming at the target symbolizes the unveiling of female agency. Through these repeated acts of resistance, the protagonists demonstrate how gender norms can be renegotiated through alternative performances.

Ageism and Casting Controversy

Despite its empowering narrative, *Saand Ki Aankh* generated controversy due to its casting decisions. The roles of the elderly protagonists were played by younger actresses who underwent extensive makeup and prosthetics to appear older. Critics argued that this decision reflected systemic ageism within the film industry. Veteran actresses pointed out that older women rarely receive substantial roles in mainstream cinema.

This issue reflects broader patterns in global film industries. Studies indicate that female actors often experience declining opportunities after middle age, while male actors continue to receive leading roles.

From an intersectional perspective, the controversy surrounding *Saand Ki Aankh* highlights the overlapping structures of gender and age discrimination within Bollywood.

Sport often functions as a site for negotiating gender identity. Participation in athletic activities challenges traditional stereotypes about female weakness and dependency.

In *Saand Ki Aankh*, shooting becomes a symbol of empowerment. The protagonists' success inspires younger generations within their community, particularly their daughters and granddaughters. Their achievements demonstrate that empowerment is not limited by age or social background.

Conclusion

Saand Ki Aankh represents an important moment in the evolving landscape of feminist cinema in India. By narrating the extraordinary achievements of Chandro and Prakashi Tomar, the film challenges stereotypes about rural women and aging.

However, the film also reveals persistent structural inequalities within the film industry. The controversy surrounding its casting decisions highlights the ongoing challenges of achieving inclusive representation in cinema.

Ultimately, the significance of *Saand Ki Aankh* lies in its ability to generate critical conversations about gender, age, and representation. As Bollywood continues to evolve, such discussions remain essential for fostering more equitable and inclusive storytelling practices.

References

➢ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

➢ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039

➢ de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.

➢ Dwyer, Rachel. *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India*. Reaktion Books, 2014.

➢ hooks, bell. "Feminism Is for Everybody." *Pluto Press*, www.plutobooks.com/blog/feminism-is-for-everybody-bell-hooks/. Accessed 20 Feb. 2026.

➢ *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. Directed by Alankrita Shrivastava, Prakash Jha Productions, 2016.

➢ Ganti, Tejaswini. *Producing Bollywood*. Duke University Press, 2012.

➢ hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 2000.

➢ Majumdar, Neepa. *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!* University of Illinois Press, 2009.

➢ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18. *Oxford Academic*, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6

➢ Nandy, Ashis. *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

➢ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 1979.

➢ *Saand Ki Aankh*. Directed by Tushar Hiranandani, Reliance Entertainment, 2019.