



# Women in Indian Cinema: A Historical Perspective

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## Abstract:

The representation of women in Indian cinema has changed significantly, mirroring larger social, cultural, and political shifts in the country. The representation of women has gradually changed from the early decades, when female characters were frequently limited to the conventional roles of obedient spouses and mothers, to the rise of more nuanced and independent heroines. The 1970s and 1980s parallel cinema movement challenged popular narratives by introducing more complex and realistic female characters. Stronger roles and films that focus on women have become more popular in recent years, bringing attention to topics like gender inequity, identity, and empowerment. The path of women in Indian film is a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity since issues like typecasting and underrepresentation still exist despite advancements.

*Key Words:-* Cinema, Bollywood, Female Character, Progress, Society, Feminist ideas,

## Introduction

With every new creation, cinema is a potent tool for amusement, transformation, and influencing or modifying social standards. It can be seen of as a mirror of society, reflecting societal cultures, attitudes, and ideas. Cinema has the power to significantly impact society through its stories and representations, changing people's attitudes toward women as well as their thoughts and actions. What is portrayed in movies and what need to be portrayed relies on the kind of social changes that are wanted. Film content has a direct impact on how society behaves, either favourably or unfavourably. The way female characters are portrayed in movies has a significant impact on how the audience views them. The dignity of women in contemporary society is preserved and improved by movies that present them as self-reliant, capable, independent, and optimistic individuals. Cinema has the ability to question established and customary conventions, encouraging viewers to reevaluate ingrained gender dynamics that impede women's empowerment. Cinema can encourage society to adopt more egalitarian and respectful attitudes toward women by showcasing progressive and uplifting portrayals of women.<sup>1</sup> This article discusses the rapidly changing roles of women represented in Indian cinema and their impact on patriarchal Indian society, with an emphasis on several prominent Bollywood films. The goal is to connect the shifting characters portrayed by women in films to the increasing status of women in India, as films reflect changes in social structures.

Indian cinema has mirrored the country's changing social scene with its colorful tapestry of song, dance, and drama. But the way women are portrayed on TV has drastically changed, moving from objectified characters to complex, autonomous people.

Indian film has changed significantly since independence. For instance, it has seen a notable transition from traditional mythological blockbusters to "Bollywoodized" remakes of Hollywood's popular movies. The world's largest film industry is found in India. Every year, it creates more than a thousand films in more than twenty languages. Hollywood, on the other hand, makes fewer than 400 movies annually.<sup>ii</sup>

Cinema transforms print media by using audio-visual tools to inspire and influence illiterate people through the creation of captivating films. It enables the exploration of new dimensions of cultural norms and issues, such as gender dynamics in terms of casteism, colorism, objectification, discrimination, and sexual harassment of women. Bollywood has created a significant number of films on a variety of topics, including family, social drama, religious themes, affairs, and family and societal difficulties. It is undeniable that cinema has the capacity to influence society's thinking and perception of women, but the standing of women in society must also be changed. In the previous decade, Bollywood has produced a large number of women-centric films, in which women's roles have evolved from traditional to nuanced and diversified. Female characters are shown to defy conventional rules and break stereotypes. However, women's portrayal was limited to specific characteristics such as wives, mothers, housewives, devoted ladies, and so on. If a professional woman is represented on screen, it is customary to notify the audience that she faces a variety of obstacles, ranging from objectification to sexual harassment at her workplace or elsewhere.<sup>iii</sup>

Some outstanding milestones have been set by women in the Indian film business. For instance, Lata Mangeshkar is included in the Guinness Book as the world's most recorded singer, while Helen has danced in more than a thousand films. The portrayal of strong, multifaceted individuals in movies is crucial. Women have not lagged far behind in this regard.<sup>iv</sup>

In Bollywood cinema "Raja Harishchandra" was the first film. 1913 saw its release. Dadasaheb Phalke directed the movie. When Indian cinema first emerged, women were not allowed to appear in the movies. Thus, male performers used to portray female parts as well. Up until 1931, Bollywood movies had no sound. The first woman to enter the film industry was Ardeshir Irani, who transformed Indian cinema by redefining the significance of women in motion pictures. In the movies. In 1931, he released "Alam Ara," the first motion picture with sound. Then, in 1937, "Kisan Kanya," the first colored Bollywood movie, came out. The film was not a big success. Color films did not become commercially successful until the 1950s. Film songs and dancing were important factors in determining a film's appeal. The majority of songs from the 1950s remain popular today. This period saw the rise of outstanding Bollywood performers and actresses such as Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Nutan, Meena Kumari Madhubala, and others. Films play a significant impact in depicting and influencing social issues. In terms of pay, status, and positions, the prominent ladies of that era were on level with their male counterparts.<sup>v</sup>

When gorgeous and independent Devika Rani, Zubeidaa, Mehtab, and Shobhana Samarth opened doors for women in cinema, nobody could have predicted that in the future, actresses would only be used as showpieces. Zubeida, a wealthy Nawab's daughter and the daughter of Fatima Begum, became well-known with "Alam Ara" and earned a big salary. Time has shifted. In this regard, Kangana Ranaut said: "They (male actors) take all the money, so forget about the credit." Not even one-third of what male performers earn is paid to us. It's more about being a woman than it is about money.<sup>vi</sup>

Indian cinema's early years were characterized by a male-dominated environment. Women were hardly shown in silent movies, and when they were, it was usually as the "sacrificing mother," ready to put up with adversity for her family. The "damsel in distress," who was always in need of male heroes to save her, appeared in countless romances. Another recurrent theme was the "vamp," an alluring but ultimately evil figure. Despite having female characters, these depictions confined women to positions that were predictable and constrained. But the seeds of change were being planted. Indian society was impacted

by the emergence of feminism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and these social changes were reflected in film. Innovative reformers like Tarabai Shinde and Savitribai Phule questioned gender norms and promoted women's education. Growing awareness of gender inequity was spurred by these concepts and the impact of Western feminist movements. The rise of Parallel Cinema in the 1970s was a watershed. Directors like Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen led this movement, which questioned popular narratives and provided a more accurate representation of human realities, particularly those of women. Movies that explored issues of female sexuality, desire, and independence, such as *Arth* (1982), sparked public conversation about gender inequity. Actresses like Smita Patil and Shabana Azmi emerged as potent messengers of these shifting stories. Their unvarnished performances challenged conventional ideas of womanhood by giving voice to previously unheard female opinions.<sup>vii</sup>

Feminist ideas were given a forum by Parallel Cinema, but mainstream cinema also started to mirror similar developments. Female characters become more diverse in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The "commercial heroine" was personified by actresses like Madhuri Dixit and Kajol, who were strong, self-reliant women who could stand up for themselves without losing their femininity. Strong female leads who defied social norms were present in movies like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), even though they were confined to romance stories. The representation of women in Indian cinema today is more colorful and complex. The "woman-centric film" is becoming more popular, emphasizing the stories of women. Movies like *English Vinglish* (2012) and *Queen* (2014) challenge the idea that women's fulfillment must be linked to males by exploring female emancipation and self-discovery. In addition to being glitzy celebrities, actresses like Priyanka Chopra and Deepika Padukone are also producers, activists, and role models who support social change. In Indian cinema, the quest for gender balance is still ongoing. Actresses of color and those who don't fit traditional beauty standards frequently struggle to land roles, making representation difficult. In addition, some movies still objectify women, which is another problem with the male gaze. The trajectory is evident, though. Unquestionably, feminism has had a significant impact on Indian film, guaranteeing a greater range of female characters and stories that capture the complexity of contemporary womanhood. Indian cinema's portrayal of women will develop together with it, providing a more accurate and inclusive depiction of their lives and experiences.<sup>viii</sup>

Women are the foundation of society; without them, society would not exist. Women have always played a key role in the advancement of both society and the country. The days of treating women like objects, enslaving them, and having them take care of the home were long gone. Due to gender dynamics, preconceptions, and customs, women suffered greatly. These challenges degraded women's identities and trapped them in a quagmire. Women received the same treatment as offenders and were bound with rivets. However, things change with time, and after a protracted battle, women now have more opportunities. The 21st-century woman became an example to others and accomplished numerous milestones in every aspect of life. Despite all of this, it is impossible to declare with certainty that the perception of women has entirely changed and is unaffected by conventional conventions and preconceptions. However, there is still work to be done to improve the status of women in society and on television. Through the introduction or support of compelling characters, powerful themes, and sophisticated storytelling, cinema plays a significant influence in the representation of women. Bollywood boasts a sizable repertory of women-focused films that demonstrate the strength of female emancipation, such as *Mother India*, *Thappad*, *Dangal*, and *Chak De! India*, *Pink*, *Mardaani*, *India*, and numerous others. These films had a powerful lead character who altered society's perception of women.<sup>ix</sup>

The representation of women has evolved from stereotypes to strong women as film has advanced significantly. Although more work needs to be done in this area, the actions that have already been done are praiseworthy and are significantly improving the status of women. Women are now shown as independent, although in the past they were shown to be reliant on males. There are a lot of movies that focus on women; in them, women are shown as strong, independent, and in a different way than they

were in the past. They are able to make or accept decisions. In all spheres of life—economic, political, social, and educational—they will serve as role models for others. They are now progressing and making the nation proud, leaving behind the social perception of women in sports. similar to Chak De in these films! India (2007) was praised for tackling societal concerns such as regionalism, misogyny, and the value of cooperation and unity. Its realistic depiction of sports and inspiring message struck a chord with both reviewers and viewers. The true story of an Indian boxer named Mary Kom is told in the 2014 film Mary Kom. This story focuses on her personal and professional struggles, devotion, and challenges. It is more than just a sports film; it is a tribute to Mary Kom's tenacity and perseverance, honoring her accomplishments to boxing and role as a trailblazer for women in sports.<sup>x</sup>

### **Early Phase: Mythological and Ideal Woman**

India, as a patriarchal country, has long assigned women a secondary role in society. Indian women have long been subjugated. Even our literature has represented Indian women as victims of patriarchal oppression and torture. Our society's social, cultural, economic, and traditional aspects have all contributed to women's enslavement. Women have faced many forms of prejudice and abuse. In mythology, ideal women are those who are humble, loyal, and true to their husbands, blindly following their orders and worshipping them as God. These women were regarded as having no existence outside of their husband. The representation of women in Indian English fiction saw a revolutionary transience throughout time in the post-colonial era. The "new woman" took the place of the ideal woman. What made these new women so radical, and who were they? The "New Women" were the women who began to rebel against customs, traditional beliefs, and values as well as against women's subjection, oppression, and the dominant patriarchal system. She was the lady who no longer shied away from taking the initiative and who had begun to walk outside the four walls of her home to demand her rights. She was fearless, powerful, self-reliant, and outspoken. She wasn't scared to voice her opinions or speak up for what she believed to be injustice and wrong, not only for herself but also for others. However, were these ladies merely products of the contemporary era? Although the phrase and idea originated in the contemporary era, our mythologies have hints of the traits that the New Woman possessed.<sup>xi</sup>

Religious films make a significant contribution to Indian cinema, which is not simply a treasure mine of horror, romance, action, and other genres. Which continues to inspire our evolving culture and serves as an example for others to follow in their footsteps. If a woman speaks out against atrocities in her family and society, some women in society who believe in old customs and some people who have a male chauvinistic mindset tell her to become like Sita, who lived a normal life despite so many problems. Why can't you bear it when a princess living in a palace has been exiled for fourteen years? Why don't the people who say this have such a male-centric perspective that if they can become a wife like Sita, why can't their husband become a beacon of integrity and dignity like Ram? If society wants to regard women as Sita, the same idea would apply to men, who must become like Shri Ram. But in the end, King Ram refused to accept Sita. History repeats itself, and similar ideologies are still prominent in society. Why doesn't society use the example of Draupadi, who battled injustice and sought justice by publicly criticizing the kauravs?<sup>xii</sup>

The first character is Urmila from Sita's Sister by Kavita Kane. In this book, Urmila—the epic's most disregarded and underappreciated character—is given her full potential. She now has a strong feminist voice. She questioned patriarchy's subjugation of women. She fulfilled all of her obligations while also taking a firm stance against the mistreatment she and her sisters received at the hands of their husbands and in-laws. She was able to make her own choices and accept the repercussions of those choices. She made the choice to wed Lakshman despite being aware that she would always come in second on his list of priorities because his older brother Ram would always come first. Lakshman was spared from Rishi Parshuram's wrath and indignation during Sita's swayamvar because to Urmila's cunning. When they got to Ayodhya after getting married, Queen Kaikeyi ridiculed Sita for being an orphan and forced

Ram to get married again. It was Urmila who rebelled against this oppression. When the two people she loved the most, Sita and Lakshman, departed with Ram for his fourteen-year exile without considering her, she was saddened. However, she prepared herself to handle all of her duties related to the royal household and state issues rather than merely sitting and sobbing. She was the one who assisted the family in adjusting to King Dasrath's passing. In addition, she revealed Manthara's wicked intents and assisted Shatrughan in handling the palace and state matters. When Bharat planned to perform penance as a hermit till Ram came to Ayodhya, she revolted. She wanted to prevent Mandvi from suffering the same fate she was. She was not afraid to face the great saints of their court, who denounced her for revolting against the dharma. They taught about the dharma of a monarch for his realm, a brother for his brother, and a son for his father. She questioned them about the dharma of a husband for his wife and a son for his mother. She made it obvious to them that she will not tolerate the shabby and dismal conditions that women are expected to bear. When she learned that Sita was subjected to a fire trial to establish her chastity, she became outraged, wondering how Ram could allow this to occur. She reflected on how the same Ram who should have cared for Ahalya was unable to protect his own wife from disgrace by subjecting her to such a test. The work portrays Urmila as a strong, fearless, broadminded, advanced, dutiful, and outspoken woman, the ideal model of a forerunner of the feminist movement that emerged centuries later.<sup>xiii</sup>

The second character is Paanchali, from Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*. Instead than being timid and docile, she portrayed Paanchali as a powerful, strong, and fearless woman who was on equal footing with the males. She and her brother Dhri emerged from the sacred fire as the daughter of Paanchal's king Drupad, motivated by vengeance. She was naturally rebellious and belligerent, with a strong sense of self. She was not interested in learning about the feminine pastimes that a princess should engage in, according to her father. She was more likely to study things that men were expected to learn in order to become kings, such as war skills and political lessons. She had to endure a great deal of humiliation in the Kuru court after she asked Karna, the man she secretly loved, about his caste and place of birth in order to save her brother Dhri. She endured many challenges and humiliation as a result of having to wed the five Pandavas. At that period, ladies from royal families were kept out of the public eye, daughters were married off as soon as they reached puberty, and women were only seen as objects of desire and property. However, she was always aware that she was destined for more; her life would be different, and she would work to change it. She questioned a husband's dharma and asked the courtroom how he could stake his wife in a game of gambling after being humiliated by Duryodhan, Karna, and Dushasan. Her inquiries informed the Kuru dynasty's flag bearers of their moral shortcomings and silenced them. When she thinks, "I'm a queen, daughter of Drupad and sister of Dhristadyamna," she asserts that she has a unique identity and is not a Pandava property. The mistress of the world's greatest palace. I cannot be brought to court like a dancing girl or squandered away like a sack of gold. The Kuru clan was rocked by her curse and her vow of vengeance, which resulted in the annihilation of the 100 Kaurava brothers. It was difficult for a princess like her to spend a significant portion of her life in the forest with the Pandavas, but she overcame all of these challenges and became a notable character in Aryavrat history. Long before feminist theories emerged, Urmila and Paanchali both began the struggle against long-standing patriarchy. They were capable of making their own decisions and resilient enough to deal with the fallout. They rebelled against what they believed to be wrong and stood up for what they believed to be right. They can undoubtedly serve as role models for contemporary women in the past. Therefore, it would be accurate to refer to them as the new women from mythology, the precursors of the later emergence of the new woman culture.<sup>xiv</sup>

## The Changing Face of Women in Indian Films (1913–Today)

1913–1980: Mythological tales and huge epics dominated Indian cinema's early years. Raja Harishchandra, the first feature film, told a mythical tale. Indian film thus developed into a platform for expressing resentment and calling for independence from British colonial control during the liberation war era. Indian cinema tackled social themes and difficulties after independence, aiming to depict a society that was both desirable and attainable. Bollywood movies were at their best from the 1950s till the late 1970s. During this period, movies highlighted our rich culture, the rural area, familial and amicable connections, conventions, norms, and ethics. Additionally, the problems of poverty were emphasized. The appeal was in how easily viewers could relate to the characters on television. In the movies, women played significant roles. To sell the movies on the market, they had a great deal of duty. Alongside the male actors, women were given equally prominent roles in the movies. Some well-known movies from this era include Mother India, Kaagaz Ke Phool, Pakeezah, Half Ticket, and Padosan.<sup>xv</sup>

Consider the 1957 film "Mother India" by filmmaker Mehboob, which combines socialistic and traditional beliefs. The film Mother India begins with Radha, an elderly woman, being requested to inaugurate a new canal through her hamlet. The men who preside over the occasion dress simply and speak to Radha as the village's mother. They won't let anyone else inaugurate the canal. The film introduces Radha as a survivor who will usher in a new era of prosperity and growth. The film highlights the value of being a woman. The concept of Bharat Mata, or Mother India, is deeply ingrained in Indian culture. The film's song suggests that women are expected to leave their parents' homes after marriage. The words to its songs are really intense. The film's lyrics suggest that "laaj is a woman's dharma." The film portrays Radha as a survivor who would usher in a new era of prosperity and expansion. The film emphasizes the importance of being a woman. The concept of Bharat Mata, or Mother India, is profoundly embedded in Indian culture. The film's song implies that women are expected to leave their parental houses after marriage. The lyrics to its songs are really intense. The film's lyrics imply that "laaj is a woman's dharma."<sup>xvi</sup>

The action era in Bollywood cinema began in the 1980s. It caused significant changes. Bollywood heroines were overshadowed by their male counterparts. She was relegated to a glossy aspect of the pictures. She danced about trees and was kidnapped, raped, or killed. Ketan Mehta's 1989 film "Mirch Masala" serves as an illustration of a female action part in Indian cinema. In the western region of pre-independence India, Sonbai (Smita Patil) works in a chili factory. Her spouse moves to the city after landing a job in the railroad industry. The Subedar, often known as the tax collector, shows up in the interim to collect taxes. He calls Mukhi, the village headman, to bring Sonbai to him after falling in love with her. However, he unintentionally brings the wrong woman. The Subedar abruptly snatched Sonbai when she chance to walk past their camp the following day. She manages to break away and dashes into her place of employment, a chili factory. She is protected by Abu Miyan (Om Puri), an elderly Muslim watchman. After discovering that her husband has formed an alliance with the Subedar to transfer Sonbai to him, the mistreated Mukhi's wife, the Mukhiani, travels to Sonbai's residence. The Subedar and his hunchmen mock Mukhiani's protest. When they get to the factory, they murder the guard and smash the doors. The other ladies in the factory abruptly toss sacks of chili powder over Sonbai's face as the Subedar approaches him in the last scene. In this movie, women are shown as gorgeous figures, such as dancing women and Subedar's passionate gaze. In a different scene, the Subedar uses a telescope to view Sonbai.<sup>xvii</sup>

The female body has been a crucial component of an actress's success in contemporary cinema history. Their voluptuous physique are a testament to the amount of time they spend working out at the gym. For instance, Sri Devi, the leading lady of the 1980s, is referred to as "thunder thighs." Like other female celebrities, Sri Devi spends hours in the makeup room to play the aggressive, domineering roles. She outfought the men in "Himmatwala" and outdanced them. She confronted and vanquished the villains

on her own. Even two of the best male heroes in "Joshila" (1989) struggled to maintain their roles when they were paired with Sri Devi. According to Showtime, September, 1987, "Is Sri Devi a hero? During this period, attitudes and perceptions regarding women completely transformed. Traditional social standards have been shaken by women in Indian cinema. For instance, one of the most influential actresses of her era, Devika Rani, creator of Bombay Talkies studio, delivered the first and possibly longest kiss in Hindi cinema.<sup>xviii</sup>

The 1990s period followed. More modifications were brought about in Hindi cinema. The films during this era demonstrated how women's roles in Indian cinema were evolving. Raveena Tandon starred in the 1994 movie "Mohra" as Roma Singh. Roma appeared to be a highly "liberated" woman based on her body language. Monica Motwani noted that "the heroine may have metamorphosed over the years, but she still cannot break away from the shackles of certain norms set by Hindi cinema years ago" in an article published in the Indian film magazine "G." The space that women had made for themselves was taken away. Heroines were reduced to a beautiful film role while heroes took the stage. There was nothing about their presence that advanced the plot. Bollywood movies deteriorated as India's influence grew worldwide. Actresses like Tabu and Vidya Balan had a unique opportunity to carry stories of women's emancipation. However, there were very few of these opportunities. Some popular movies from the 1990s post-liberalization era expressed a longing for a conventional lifestyle in which men made the money and women took care of their households. Madhuri Dixit won hearts with Hum Apke Hai Kaun, one of the biggest songs of the 1990s. She also started the pattern of heroines who would never prioritize their personal goals over that of their families. Women's nurturing roles as homemakers were once again popular. The more recent films from the late 1990s, such as "Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gum," "Kuch Kuch Hota Hai," "Dil Toh Pagal Hai," and "Biwi No. 1," featured women as homemakers and ornaments. These contemporary young filmmakers did not portray women as working women in any of these films.<sup>xix</sup>

Singh (2007) demonstrates how Indian mythology is a major source of popular appeal in popular movies. It dramatizes masculine fantasies about women and mostly shares the ideals and interests of male prejudice. As a result, women are portrayed as either monsters or angels. The distinction between a vampire and a heroine vanished at some point in the 1990s. The heroine moved as provocatively and dressed as audaciously as the historical bad girl. As a result of globalization and materialism, several critics claimed that heroines had to become more decorative than actual women due to mass production. She may be seen dancing in snow-covered Switzerland or Australia, but she essentially adheres to the image of a homemaker that Indian men fantasize about. The shift in the visuals has been gradual rather than abrupt.<sup>xx</sup>

In this sense, the question of whether movies mimic or reflect life can also be explored. The movies frequently disregarded the fact that many women labor in both rural and urban settings. In a patriarchal and male-dominated society, it was difficult for women to establish a solid foundation. However, women in Indian cinema have succeeded in doing so. Filmdom doesn't seem to represent this shifting social trend at a time when women are shattering taboos and preconceptions. Although the number of women entering the film industry has increased significantly, their roles on screen have severely decreased. The male counterparts are frequently given unfair favor over the female counterparts, from the plot to the end credits. Fortunately, several filmmakers have become well-known as change agents among audiences that desired a departure from the conventional narratives. Heroines that wish to deviate from the conventional tropes now have the chance to do so. Strong female characters have historically received the attention and recognition they deserve in the Indian film industry. Silently, steadily, and non-confrontationally, women in the film industry are recognized to be powerful contributors to changing the face of Indian cinema.<sup>xxi</sup>

## Women-Oriented Hindi Movies

### Saand ki aankh:

The biopic Saand Ki Aankh tells the narrative of Chandro (Bhumi Pednekar) and Prakash (Taapsee Pannu) Tomar, two sisters who decided to become sharpshooters at the age of sixty-five. Women are expected to be homemakers and subject to their husbands and fathers in their patriarchal society, where the sisters live. The sisters are determined to pursue their passion for shooting, even if it means rejecting their families and the community. The film begins with the Tomar sisters marrying into the same household. They rapidly bond over their mutual passion of shooting and want to be free of the limitations of traditional society. However, despite opposition from their spouses and families, the Tomar sisters continue to train secretly. Yashpal, a local physician, supports them and pushes them to follow their goals because he sees their potential. The Tomar sisters' husbands find them at the shooting range one day. Their spouses are enraged and have banned them from ever shooting again. The Tomar sisters, however, are adamant on carrying on with their shooting and disobey their husbands' directives. The Tomar sisters' defiance of their husbands and fathers inspires other women in the village to pursue their own dreams. The sisters become a symbol of women's empowerment in the hamlet once they begin teaching other women to shoot. The path of the Tomar sisters is not simple. Among the many difficulties they encounter are opposition from their own families and mockery from the society. But they never give up on their aspirations, and in the end, they succeed in becoming proficient shooters. The inspirational tale of two ladies who overcome all obstacles to realize their aspirations is told in the film Saand Ki Aankh.<sup>xxii</sup>

### Queen

Rani Mehra (Kangana Ranaut), a vibrant and energetic Desi girl born in Delhi, is betrothed to Vijay (Rajkumar Rao). But when Vijay confides in her and says he is going to change his mind and not marry her, all of her happiness and excitement swiftly turns into heartbreaking despair. Right now, Rani is distraught and confused of what to do. After being deeply depressed for a few days, she decides to go to Paris. Meanwhile, she has no idea what adventures await her on the excursion (Queen, 2014). When she first arrives, she faces challenges and problems because of cultural shock and ignorance. However, she soon makes a good friend in Vijaya Lakshmi (Lisa Haydon), a hotel staff who helps her recuperate and allows her to enjoy her time in Paris. She meets three charming housemates in Amsterdam who help her cope with her loss. She eventually realizes that her life is about herself during this process, as she rediscovers herself.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### Lapata Ladies:

This film does a good job of addressing a few subjects such as female empowerment, societal expectations, and the weirdness that occurs in today's relationships in a lighthearted yet serious comedy. Here's how it affects viewers and shapes societal discussions: In contrast to common stereotypes, it depicts women as multidimensional creatures with their own interests and aspirations. This display inspires viewers' brains to generate fresh concepts rather than what is typically considered as societal roles for women. The film uses lighthearted comedy to convey serious ideas. It allows viewers to debate subjects like as independence and identity without the gravity that is typically associated with these discussions. "Lapata Ladies" brings conversations between friends and family to platforms about the challenges that women face today. It initiates a conversation about women's rights, personal autonomy, and a sense of safety inside women's groups. The film does mirror the hardships and challenges of modern society, making it very accessible to the majority of spectators. It captures the hearts of the majority of viewers with its portrayal of personal freedom and relationships. Highlighting women's resiliency and the value of friendship encourages viewers to strive for change in their own lives and communities, creating unity and empowerment in women. In a broader sense, "Lapata Ladies" entertains

while also causing a positive attitude shift in society about women, as well as empowering and sparking conversations that may eventually lead to greater understanding and change.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Gangubai Kathiawadi**

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* follows a female heroine in Mumbai's red light district as she transitions from weakness to strength. While tackling issues of female empowerment, exploitation, and independence, the movie departs from the "female gaze," which highlights the aspirations, passions, and experiences of female viewers. However, there are elements in "*Gangubai Kathiawadi*" that appeal to the feminine gaze. Gangubai's transformation into a strong, brave woman who takes control of her life and protects her neighborhood is relatable to female viewers since it is an example of female empowerment. The film portrays its female protagonists as complex individuals with authority, desires, and challenges, giving a realistic depiction of women's life. The film emphasizes female bonds by showing the solidarity and support among women in the red-light district. Despite going underground and engaging in illegal activity, the tale centers on Gangubai's journey and her relationships with other women; this is in line with stories that emphasize female protagonists. Therefore, it is significant that the film's overall direction and style—both of which are characteristics of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's work—might not exactly fit the traditional idea of the female gaze. The entire movie features Bhansali's trademark opulent and lavish narrative and visual components.<sup>xxv</sup>

This analysis of Bollywood films, such as "*Saand Ki Aankh*," "*Queen*," "*Lapata Ladies*," and "*Gangubai Kathiawadi*," provides insights into the changing trends in the representation of female characters and the paradigm shift toward the portrayal of women as independent, driven, and career-focused. "*Saand Ki Aankh*" delivers a gripping tale that challenges patriarchal norms by portraying the Tomar sister-in-laws as strong, self-reliant, and gifted women who reject conventional expectations. The film promotes the feminine gaze by portraying women as heroes and questioning gender stereotypes.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **The Rise of Women in Cinema: From Marginalization to Power**

We can argue that without women, society would not exist. Women are the foundation of society. Women have always played a crucial role in the evolution of both society and the country. The days of treating women like objects, enslaving them, and having them serve as housekeepers were long gone. Due to gender dynamics, preconceptions, and conventional norms, women suffered greatly. These challenges soiled women's identities and trapped them like a quagmire. Women received the same treatment and were bound with rivets as offenders. However, things change with time, and after a protracted fight, women now have more opportunities. The 21st-century woman became an example to others and accomplished numerous milestones in every aspect of life. Despite all of this, it is impossible to declare with certainty that the perception of women has entirely changed and is unaffected by conventional conventions and preconceptions. However, there is still work to be done to improve the status of women in society and on television. Through the introduction or support of compelling characters, powerful themes, and sophisticated storytelling, cinema plays a significant influence in the representation of women. Bollywood films such as *Mother India*, *Thappad*, *Dangal*, *Chak De! India*, *Mardaani*, *Pink*, and many more demonstrate the strength of women's emancipation. These films had a powerful lead character who altered society's perception of women.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Women's path to empowerment is not as simple as it first appears. Things that seem simple are actually rather challenging. When I learned that Dada Sahab Phalke, who is considered the creator of Indian cinema, had no female characters in his first film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), it was extremely discriminatory. Women were not allowed to participate in public performances due to social conventions and taboos. Dadasaheb Phalke later came to understand the role of women in movies. Dada Sahab Phalke's 1913 film *Mohini Bhasmasur* was the first to feature women; Durga Bai Kamat was the first female artist, and Kamla Bai Kamat was the first female child performer. As the first talkies actress and

co-founder of the Bombay talkies studio, Devika Rani is also recognized globally as the first woman in Indian film for her groundbreaking work. Over the course of ten years, she enjoyed a prosperous career in film.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In the past, women were shown in movies in a way that allowed the audience to enjoy the objectification of women rather than an attempt to alter people's attitudes toward women. Back then, prostitution and the art of performing women were often compared. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's freshly launched web series, *Heeramandi*, focuses on Heera Mandi's past, wherein courtesans' lives were made public. Through this series, Bhansali has raised awareness of the current perception of courtesans as well as the numerous forms of torture and difficulties they endured. Previously, being a courtesan was not a sin; instead, they entertained kings and emperors through *Mujra*, and people from wealthy families would send their children to them to learn manners, etiquette, and the art of singing. However, as the regime changed, the actual role of courtesans began to diminish. Historically, courtesans did not engage in prostitution, but certain monarchs forced them to do so. The skill that had been suppressed in them gradually faded, and they began to engage in prostitution alongside *Mujra*; the way people perceived courtesans had shifted from courtesans to prostitutes. *Heera Mandi* was once famous for its moon phase art, but has since transformed into a 'red light district'. This style of picture demonstrates how male domination affects the situation of women in society. This begs the question of how talented women must shape themselves according to societal expectations and lose their skills!<sup>xxix</sup>

Following the representation of women as victims of violence, objectification, and stigma, the new wave arrived with the first woman-centric film, *Mother India*, which, as the name implies, depicts female power. Women who have the power to raise their children, husbands, families, and societies, as well as the power to face problems and combat injustice. In this film, *Radha* is shown as a multidimensional character who rose to become the embodiment of a high-achieving lady and a source of inspiration for society. The film's success also inspired cinema and paved the path for the production of other women-centric films in *Bhartiya* cinema. The portrayal of this conscientious woman figure persona is a highlighting branch of depiction in Hindi film popular culture. However, *Nirupama Roy's* portrayal in movie, as the queen of sorrow who worshiped her husband like God, adhered to traditional and clichéd roles. She played typical Indian mothers in a number of films. Her performance was characterized by intense emotional resonance and received considerable praise. The pitiful characters in cinema are depicted as if they had no purpose in life. Their sole aim in life is to worship their husband as a *Pati Parmeshwar* and continue along the path they have chosen, even if it is fraught with hardship. No one should speak out against them in any way. Women were portrayed as selfless mothers, dutiful wives, homemakers, objects of sexual desire, and morally responsible individuals. Women had no verification of their existence in cinema, but were necessary for amusement purposes; women were shown as dependent on males rather than independent.<sup>xxx</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, gender dynamics in society are greatly shaped and reflected by film. The continuous development of female characters in movies highlights the medium's capacity to dispel long-standing preconceptions, spur social change, and build a more just and inclusive society. This study has brought to light a number of important issues. From traditional, passive characters to more assertive and diverse representations, the way women are portrayed in movies has traditionally reflected cultural values. In addition to reflecting shifting social norms, this evolution actively contributes to their acceleration. Strong, multifaceted female characters in movies have the power to profoundly alter viewers' opinions by dispelling negative stereotypes and enhancing the roles and potential of women in society. This has a knock-on impact, inspiring aspirations and behavioral changes in the actual world. In movies, female characters are important role models, especially for younger audiences. Films may encourage a

generation that values and works toward gender equality by showcasing women in leadership, action, and intellectually stimulating roles.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Film depictions of women that are progressive can serve as catalysts for more significant social change. These depictions have the power to influence public opinion and legislation about gender equality, fostering a more equitable and inclusive society. There are still a lot of obstacles to overcome before women are fully and authentically represented in movies, despite tremendous progress.<sup>xxxii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Verma, Diksha, and AsgharAli Ansari. "From Screen to Society: The Influence of Female Characters in Cinema on Real-World Gender Dynamics." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL): A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal* 12, no. 3 (2024): 228–234.

<sup>ii</sup> Sharma, Sonu, and Jitendar Singh Narban. "Indian Cinema and Women." *International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education* 2, no. 1 (2016): 491-494.

<sup>iii</sup> Verma, Diksha, and AsgharAli Ansari. "From Screen to Society: The Influence of Female Characters in Cinema on Real-World Gender Dynamics." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL): A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal* 12, no. 3 (2024): 228–234.

<sup>iv</sup> Sharma, Sonu, and Jitendar Singh Narban. "Indian Cinema and Women." *International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education* 2, no. 1 (2016): 491-494.

<sup>v</sup> ibid

<sup>vi</sup> ibid

<sup>vii</sup> Kumar, Sudhir. "Feminism in Indian Cinema: A Study of Characters in Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies*." *International Journal of Contemporary Research in Multidisciplinary* 3, no. 6 (2024): 206–209.

<sup>viii</sup> ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Verma, Diksha, and AsgharAli Ansari. "From Screen to Society: The Influence of Female Characters in Cinema on Real-World Gender Dynamics." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL): A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal* 12, no. 3 (2024): 228–234.

<sup>x</sup> ibid

<sup>xi</sup> Mohanty, Ayuta. "Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology." *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science and Technology (IJSRST)* 4, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>xii</sup> Verma, Diksha, and AsgharAli Ansari. "From Screen to Society: The Influence of Female Characters in Cinema on Real-World Gender Dynamics." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL): A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal* 12, no. 3 (2024): 228–234.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mohanty, Ayuta. "Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology." *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science and Technology (IJSRST)* 4, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>xiv</sup> ibid

<sup>xv</sup> Sharma, Sonu, and Jitendar Singh Narban. "Indian Cinema and Women." *International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education* 2, no. 1 (2016): 491-494.

<sup>xvi</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xvii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xviii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xix</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xx</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxi</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxii</sup> Gandhi, Kavya, and Kiransri Srinivasan. "Bollywood's Feminist Revolution: A Study of the Emerging Trends and Themes in the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema." *Journal of Communication and Management* 4, no. 01 (2025): 36-44.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxiv</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxv</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxvi</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxvii</sup> Verma, Diksha, and AsgharAli Ansari. "From screen to society: the influence of female characters in cinema on real-world gender dynamics." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)* 12, no. 3 (2024).

<sup>xxviii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxix</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxx</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxxi</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxxii</sup> *ibid*

