

Cultural Conformity Vs. Agency: Representations of the Modern Woman in Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract: Cinema being the most powerful tool in shaping and reinforcing the values of society, also creates space for change and new identities. In India, Hindi cinema the so called Bollywood, having a wide range of audience plays an influential role in the cultural industry especially in the representation of the society particularly on how women are seen — both within families and in wider social life. The study is grounded on how film portrays the conflict between inherited tradition and contemporary assertions of individuality, especially for women who are caught between cultural expectations and their own sense of freedom.

The research explores how Bollywood continues to build the image of the “ideal bahu/beti” while also presenting women as independent figures, and what contradictions or compromises appear in these portrayals.

The research focuses on women’s struggles for dignity and autonomy in cinematic spaces, and considers how their independence is often framed within traditional boundaries. Analysing through qualitative methodology by purposefully sampling across the post-feminist period. The study adopts Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to interpret visuals and dialogues to understand the underlying patterns.

The study aims to trace how women’s agency is portrayed in layered ways — whether it leans toward cultural conformity or gestures toward resistance. The Bollywood narratives, while often tying empowerment to tradition, also open up moments of challenge that allow us to rethink what it means to be a “modern woman” today.

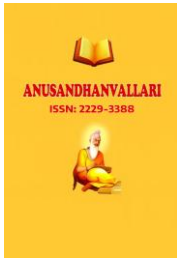
Keywords: *Indian Cinema, Bollywood, Gender Representation, Multimodal Discourse Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Bazin, A. (2004) Cinema is one of the most powerful ways of telling stories, and Bollywood especially shapes how people see culture, values, and gender roles. Women in films are often shown between the binaries of a passive woman or a pleasurable object or between a traditional woman who carries the cultural roots and a modern woman. Contemporary cinema highlights how they try to balance family duty with their own independence. My study aims at analyzing the thin line between cultural conformity and agency that a woman tries to balance in Bollywood narratives.

Indian Cinema

Indian cinema began in the early 20th century with silent film and evolved rapidly after the introduction of sound, becoming a powerful medium of mass communication over the decades; it has grown beyond entertainment into a cultural force that reflects social values, traditions, and everyday realities of Indian life. Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willemsen, P. (2014) the strength of Indian cinema is in its emotionally rich storytelling, which blends music, drama, mythology and social theme to connect deeply with audiences. Films often mirror society by addressing family structures, gender roles, moral conflicts and changing aspirations. Indian cinema is multicultural in nature, drawing from the country's vast and diverse heritage. It produces films in more than 30 languages, India produces over 1500-2000 films every year, consistently ranking among the top film producing countries in the world by



volume. Through its scale and diversity, Indian cinema continues to shape cultural identity both nationally and globally.

Bollywood cinema

Bollywood, rooted in Hindi-language cinema, has dominated India's popular imagination since the early 20th century, largely because Hindi is widely understood across regions. Vasudevan, R. (2011) Bollywood is well known for its grand visuals, emotional stories, songs that create a dream-like world for the audience. These films do more than entertain; they shape people's ideas, values and aspirations. Bollywood also heavily depends on star power, where actors are almost treated like heroes or idols. This strong celebrity worship shows how deeply cinema connects with people's emotions and becomes a way for them to escape from reality and find a sense of identity.

NEED FOR STUDY

Even though the Indian constitution promises equality and dignity to women, their everyday lives are still shaped by strong patriarchal expectations within the family and society. Kumar, R. (1989) Many women continue to face restrictions in their home, workspace, and social spaces despite having legal rights. Cinema plays a powerful role in influencing social thinking, as what people see on screen often affects how women are understood in real life. Bollywood films frequently portray women as obedient, self-sacrificing, and emotionally strong, which can quietly normalize unequal gender roles. At the same time, some films show women who question unfair norms and stand up for their dignity and independence. This gap between women's real experience and their on-screen representations makes it important to study these portrayals closely. Understanding how cinema presents women helps reveal whether film supports traditional expectations or encourages women's agency and empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars have explored how women are represented in Indian cinema, especially Bollywood.

Gopalan, L. (2002). explains at that Hindi films often supports patriarchal values by showing women as obedient, self-sacrificing, and emotionally strong within the family . These portrayals place women mainly in a domestic role.

Similarly, Dwyer, R. (2006) discusses the idea of *sanskaari bahu*, where a woman's identity is tied to marriage and tradition.

Later, there was a gradual shift in the studies of the representation.

Ghosh, A., Dutta, D., & Kaur, H. (Eds.). (2013) notes that contemporary films increasingly show women in public and professional spaces.

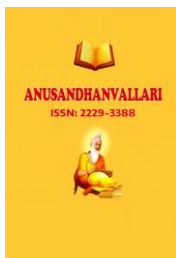
These roles allow women greater visibility and voice.

Prasad, M. (2014) argues that modern female characters balance traditional values with new aspirations shaped by globalization.

To study these portrayals closely, Fairclough (1995) and Machin & Mayr (2012) propose multi model discourse analysis.

This method examines visuals, dialogue gestures and space together.

These works provide a strong foundation for studying cultural conformity and women's agency in Bollywood cinema.



RESEARCH GAP

Most existing studies on women in Bollywood tend to divide female characters into fixed types, such as the traditional Sanskari Bahu or the modern independent woman. This kind of binary thinking ignores films where women try to find dignity and self-respect while still living within cultural and family expectations. There is very little research that focuses on this in the spaces where conformity and agency exist together. Many earlier studies also focus mainly on themes and stories rather than on how visual gestures and spaces shape meaning. This study fills those gaps by closely examining how women's agency is expressed within tradition using multi-model discourse analysis.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze how Bollywood constructs and negotiates the archetype of the ideal bahu and the independent woman.
2. To examine how women's struggles for autonomy and dignity are portrayed through cinematic spaces.
3. To investigate the ways in which women's independence is framed within the boundaries of traditional roles

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are costumes, gestures, and body language used to signify the ideal bahu versus the independent woman?
2. In what ways do dialogues and narrative arcs reinforce or challenge these archetypes?
3. What dominant ideologies shape the construction of these archetypes in Bollywood narratives?
4. How are cinematic spaces framed to signify autonomy, control, duty, or resistance?
5. Which social and cultural institutions impose conditions on women's independence in Bollywood narratives?
6. How do films symbolically negotiate women's personal agency in relation to collective family and societal duty?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study follows a qualitative and descriptive research approach to understand how women are represented in Bollywood cinema. Instead of using numbers or statistics, the focus is on meaning, interpretation, and visual storytelling. Multimodal discourse analysis is used as the main method, as it allows the study of images, dialogues, body language and cinematic space together. Films were selected through purposive sampling, meaning only those films were chosen that clearly show women negotiating between cultural conformity and personal agency. The analysis looks closely at visual elements such as camera angles, framing and settings. It also examines costumes, gestures, facial expressions, and dialogue to understand character development. Props and symbolic objects are studied to see how they reflect women's roles and identities. The character journey is analyzed to observe how dignity, resistance and independence are gradually constructed within the narrative.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Hartsock, N. C. M. (1983) feminist standpoint theory (FST), which emphasizes that women's experiences are a powerful source of knowledge about society. The theory argues that people from marginalized groups, like women, often see social inequalities and power imbalance more clearly than those in dominant positions. FST is built on three main ideas: First, knowledge is shaped by the social and cultural context



of the individual, 2nd marginalized groups are more aware of how power works in society, 3rd research that begins from the perspective of the oppressed gives a more honest and accurate understanding of social dynamics. Using this framework, the study explores how Bollywood films portray women negotiating between tradition and independence, showing how cultural expectations and personal urgency are reflected on screen.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This study examines two Bollywood films, *English Vinglish* (2012), directed by Gauri Shinde and *Thappad* (2020), directed by Anubhav Sinha, to understand how modern women are represented on screen. In *English Vinglish* the lead character Shashi is introduced as a quiet homemaker dressed in simple sarees and often ignored or undervalued by her family as the story unfolds, She slowly gains confidence and self-respect finding dignity without rejecting her family or cultural role in contrast, *Thappad* presents Amrita who begins as the ideal wife but rethinks her marriage after a single act of violence which others dismiss as “just a slap.” instead of adjusting or forgiving she chooses self-respect and independence even when questioned and pressured by society. In both films, costumes, body language, dialogue, and space clearly reflect the women's emotional journey from silence to self-assertion. Domestic spaces like kitchens and household objects suggest confinement, while certificates and legal documents symbolize empowerment together. The films show how marriage and family often resist women's choices and operate within an unequal patriarchal power structure.

FINDINGS

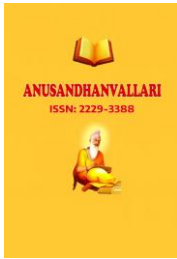
This study viewed through feminist standpoint theory shows that women in Bollywood films are not static characters but evolve over time. They often begin as traditional homemakers, reflected through simple clothing, soft gestures and household responsibilities. As the narrative progresses, there is movement slowly moving towards self-respect and independence. Dialogues play a key role in this shift, changing from polite silence to confident and firm expression. Cinematic spaces also carry meaning where the home represents restriction and public or professional spaces, such as freedom and choice, institutions like family and marriage initially limit women's voices, but later become Spaces where respect is cautioned and renegotiated. Objects such as certificates and legal papers symbolize empowerment and self-worth. Overall, the findings show that women's live experiences offer an important viewpoint for understanding agency in cinema.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Bollywood does not present women as fixed or one-dimensional characters, but as individuals who grow and change over time. The film studies show women moving between family duty and personal freedom in realistic ways; elements like costume dialog and space clearly reflect this transformation. Through the journeys of the lead characters, the study shows how women's everyday experiences question long-standing stereotypes. While patriarchal structures still exist in Bollywood narratives. There is also visible space for resistance and self-respect. Overall, the film suggests that women define dignity and empowerment in multiple ways in contemporary Indian society.

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