

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i8.3188>

A Comparative Analysis of Changing Landscapes of Female Narratives of Pre and Post Liberalization: Indian Cinema

Atreyee Dutta¹

Abstract

The study analyzes the representation of the feminine ideal in Indian cinema before and after the liberalization period. Historical, social, and cultural analyses have considered the political and economic transformations of India during the eras depicted in these films. The study employs descriptive and explanatory research design. The study seeks a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of female writing against the backdrop of India's historical, cultural, social, and political transformations. The changes noted in this area correspond with the overarching effort for gender equality and the shifting position of women in India. Films in the post-liberal context portray women as autonomous individuals capable of shaping their own destinies, surpassing the martyr archetype. The study emphasizes the surrender of autonomy, the quest for rights, and the demand for accountability to confront societal norms, contrasting with the traditional portrayal of women in the pre-liberal era.

Keywords: Cinema, Pre-Liberalization, Post-Liberalization, Female Narratives and Comparative Analysis.

Introduction

The liberalization era in India, commencing in 1991, denotes a phase of substantial economic reforms designed to integrate the nation's economy with global competition and investment, diminish governmental oversight, and advocate for market-oriented policies. Hindi films (Bollywood), an essential component of Indian cinema, have been one of the most popular forms of national entertainment since their inception. Since the era of liberalization, the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema has markedly progressed, reflecting a trend towards more nuanced representations that accurately convey the complexities of women's experiences (Gupta 2022). The transition from passive to active roles represents a change in cinematic narrative and reflects wider societal shifts concerning gender equality and women's empowerment in India. Even today, Mehboob Khan's “*Mother India*” (1957) is regarded as a timeless classic in the history of Indian cinema; however, it remains debatable why Hindi cinema has not continued to produce women-centric films before liberalization. Only after liberalization did the segmentation of women-centric Hindi films increase significantly (Sail 2023).

Cinema, at any historical juncture, reflects the society in which it exists. The popularity and receptivity of a specific film mirror societal attitudes and the prevailing consensus. Thus, cinema is not an autonomous entity; it engages with society and mirrors societal dynamics. A film produced in response to favorable reception (Jain 2024). This also illustrates the societal transformation, transitioning from *Mother India* (1956, Mehboob Khan), which portrays the challenges of a feudal society, to *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995, Aditya Chopra) set in a

¹ Symbiosis school of visual arts and photography, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Email: atreyee.dutta@ssvap.edu.in, Mobile No. 1 8160478290.



liberalized economy, and further to films such as *Thappad* (2020, Anubhav Sinha).

The showcasing of the change in the narrative of women in Indian movies from the time of liberalization to that after can be considered the representation of the societal transition in India. The progress of the portrayal of women in films from different eras also paves the ways for its visible observation. "*Mother India*" (1956) is a film that portrays the chalice of a feudal society through the eyes of Radha, a newly-wed bride and who faces criticism and sacrifices in a rural, agrarian setting. This presentation is in accordance with the nationalist ideology of the time that told women to be mothers and wives who are very good. "*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*" (1995) is a more modern narrative set in a liberalized economy but still continues to play the gender-role cards. The film points out the fact of the chaotic relationship between the traditional values and the modern ones by the male and female characters Simran and Raj that stand in the way of reaching goals. The main character, Raj, who is in love with Simran, has to get the approval from the latter's father to marry her, which ratifies patriarchal norms, which address contemporary social movements.

Social, economic, and political factors have collectively influenced the changing role of women in Indian society. The evolution of family structures, notably the transition from joint to nuclear families, has afforded women increased autonomy, as illustrated in the biographical film *Kiran Bedi* (2005). The departure from joint to nuclear family setup in India has greatly influenced the freedom of women, as depicted in movies such as "*Kiran Bedi*" (2005). In traditional joint families' women's autonomy is limited by patriarchal norms, while in nuclear families, they have more freedom to function, as they can pursue a career and self-fulfillment. Modern films like "*Thappad*" (2020) further delve into the topic of women's agency within the nuclear family, stressing individual rights versus harmony within the collective (Safarnama 2019).

Education and awareness, along with media exposure, have facilitated women's empowerment, exemplified in *English Vinglish* (2012), where the protagonist acquires confidence through mastering English (G, A. & Anu Celly 2021). The economic participation of women and the surge of consumerism, as depicted in films such as *Fashion* (2008) and *Queen* (2013), signify women's attainment of economic autonomy and entrepreneurial achievement. Political factors, such as the Women's Reservation Bill, feminist movements, and legislative changes like the Hindu Succession Act (2005), have augmented women's visibility and rights, with films like *Kahaani* (2012) and *Pink* (2016) illustrating women's agency and activism. Collectively, these elements have facilitated a significant transformation in the empowerment and representation of women in modern India (Geena 2024).

The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 is one of the most notable laws in India which brought the property rights of women into a whole new dimension. As per the laws before this act, women were not given many rights, and they had restricted limits while getting the property through traditional laws. The act introduced provisions that allowed women to hold property as full owners rather than as limited owners. Section 14 of the act outlays that any property held by a female Hindu shall be held as a full owner, giving her the absolute right to sell or to transfer the property without any constraints.

Pre Liberalization

In conventional representations of women in Indian cinema, female characters were frequently illustrated as submissive, compliant, and domesticated, conforming to patriarchal standards with restricted autonomy and agency. They were often depicted as sacrificial figures, placing the

needs and welfare of their families above their own desires and ambitions. Career prospects for women were generally limited to conventional positions such as teaching, nursing, or secretarial work, mirroring the societal expectation that women's professional aspirations should correspond with nurturing and supportive roles (Kasturi 2018). The focus on marriage and family as the paramount objectives for women eclipsed personal fulfillment and independence, reinforcing the notion that a woman's identity was predominantly defined by her relationships and domestic duties. The Hindi cinema of the 1950s was imbued with nationalism, exemplified by *Mother India* (1957, Mehboob Khan). *Mother India*, through its patriarchal narrative, depicted a woman who single-handedly raises her sons while managing agricultural responsibilities and caring for an elderly mother-in-law. She is also highly expressive regarding women's safety and dignity (Mukherjee et al 2020).

Mother India (1957) not only characterizes women-centric Hindi cinema but also shapes the trajectory of Hindi cinema, receiving ongoing acclaim for its thematic relevance. It is one of the most acclaimed films in history, serving as a quintessential model for the proliferation of female protagonists in Hindi cinema. *Sita Aur Gita* (1972) is a notable film in Indian cinema, emphasizing the portrayal of female characters. The narrative centers on two identical twins, Seeta and Geeta, who are raised in divergent settings (Chatterji 2013). The film examines themes of identity, empowerment, and social conventions. Geeta, the astute twin, embodies autonomy and fortitude, contesting conventional gender roles. Seeta, initially embodying the subjugated female, discovers her voice through Geeta's influence.

The film surfaced during a time when Indian cinema was mirroring evolving societal perspectives on women. Geeta's depiction of a formidable female protagonist diverges from previous representations, mirroring significant cultural transformations in India throughout the 1970s (Preetha 2020). A long time ago in Indian cinema, women were generally seen as characters that follow patriarchal standards, where they are submissive, self-sacrificing, and domesticated with scant independence. For instance, Radha in the movie *Mother India*, Sita in *Jai Santoshi Maa*, Chandrakukhi in *Pati Parmeshwar*, Seeta in *Seeta Aur Geeta*, and the oppressed sisters in the films of the 1980s and 1990s are the typical examples of degraded female images in the Indian cinema. These illustrations are a reflection of the reality in Indian society by showing the women's role in the domestic field and oppressing their personality. These representations reflect the societal expectations from that era, which emphasizes women's roles within the domestic sphere while marginalizing their agency. Geeta's comedic actions challenge conventional expectations of women's conduct in patriarchal environments, offering a novel perspective on female agency.

Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki is a 1978 film that illustrates the evolving female narratives in pre-liberalization India (Mathai 2015). The film explores societal attitudes towards women, portraying them as virtuous or disreputable, highlighting the marginalization and misrepresentation of women's sexuality and autonomy in Indian cinema. The film underscores the conflict with conventional values, illustrating Tulsi's tenacity and yearning for love and acceptance despite societal ostracism. The film critiques patriarchal structures that govern women's lives, demonstrating how women frequently had to adapt to endure within these limitations (Joshi 2020).

Post Liberalization

The post-liberalization period in India, especially after the economic reforms of the 1990s, resulted in substantial changes in the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema. This era signified a

shift from conventional representations of female characters, facilitating the emergence of more complex and empowered narratives (Shah 2020). Films such as *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta pioneered the exploration of female desire and sexuality. The film contests conventional gender roles and signifies a substantial transformation in the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema (Hindu College Gazette 2023).

The film, released during India's economic liberalization in the 1990s, embodies the burgeoning feminist discourses within Indian society. Movies such as *Kahaani* (2012), starring Vidya Bagchi, *Queen* (2013), starring the Rani Mehra character, *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), with the character of Sabrina Lal, and *English Vinglish* (2012), with the character of Shashi Godbole highlight the unfolding of women through cinema. *Fire* is recognized as one of the initial prominent Indian films to candidly depict lesbian relationships, thereby facilitating future narratives that examine female sexuality in a broader context (SHARMA 2016). The discussion on women's gender and sexuality should begin with cultural constructs that base gender and sexuality on biological attributes and behavioral codes. The discourse should then explore different sexualities, such as lesbian relationships, to challenge mainstream narratives and challenge traditional gender and sexual norms.

Madhur Bhandarkar's *Fashion* (2008) is a film that examines the evolving narratives of women within the Indian fashion industry. The film chronicles Meghna Mathur, a small-town girl with aspirations of becoming a supermodel, and underscores the challenges and intricacies encountered by women in a competitive and frequently merciless milieu. The film critiques gender norms, emphasizing the contrast between acceptable female behavior and transgression, as well as the reliance on male figures for validation and success. *Fashion* influences the ongoing dialogue regarding women's societal roles while challenging the frameworks that define their experiences (Agarwal 2014). *Queen* (2013) is a groundbreaking film that reinterprets female narratives in Indian cinema. The film examines themes of empowerment and feminist principles, emphasizing the significance of female solidarity.

Queen (2013) is an Indian film of historical importance that deals with the question of female's independence in a culture where they are bound by limitations many a time. The film is the story of Rani Mehra, a young woman who decides to explore Europe by herself after her fiancée decides to call off their wedding. The trip symbolizes her metamorphosis, exposing her true empowerment, self-love, and personal growth. The film's success fostered a burgeoning trend in Bollywood towards more intricate narratives focused on women's experiences, setting a precedent for future films (Jha 2014). *Pink* (2016) is a film that critiques societal norms and attitudes towards women in India. The film's most significant courtroom scene features Minal, a young woman raped by men, being cross-examined by a defense lawyer. The lawyer describes her as someone who "asked for it" because of her behavior and situation, thus respecting the prevalent approach to women being the primary ones to blame for crimes, the actual perpetrators of which are often forgotten (Kumar 2022).

The courtroom scenes in the film provide a forum for addressing broader issues concerning gender-based violence and societal views of women. The film's success fostered a burgeoning trend in Bollywood towards more socially aware narratives that emphasize women's experiences and challenges (Agrawal 2014). Indian cinema has transitioned from depicting women as submissive domestic roles to showcasing more independent, empowered characters. Early films highlighted familial and professional roles, whereas subsequent representations challenged gender norms, illustrating resilience and independence. The era of liberalization introduced

intricate representations that emphasized female desire, autonomy, and societal constraints (Mukherjee et al 2020).

The study explores the impacts of economic policies and globalization on media, particularly in shaping gender roles. It examines cinematic narratives before and after liberalization to track evolving societal values and expectations placed on women. The study also highlights the influence of Indian cinema on public perception and discourse around gender equality, women's empowerment, and identity. Educating audiences on the changes in female representation post-liberalization can foster critical viewing habits and reduce passive consumption of regressive stereotypes. The study contributes to developing theoretical models related to gender representation in postcolonial media by comparing pre- and post-liberalization portrayals. The shift from traditional roles to more complex portrayals, such as independent professionals and decision – makers, allows for a deeper understanding of the female subject in narrative theory and structuralist analysis. The study also highlights how women's roles in cinema are often linked to national identity and morality, with pre-liberalization films usually depicting women as tradition – bearers, while post-liberalization narratives may align them with modernity.

The study aims to demonstrate that Indian films from the pre- and post-liberalization periods primarily portrayed the feminine ideal as submissive, self-sacrificial, and focused on traditional family roles, while also depicting independent, modern, and empowered women, mirroring societal transitions towards gender equality and individualism. The representation of the feminine ideal in Indian cinema transitioned markedly from traditional, passive portrayals in the pre-liberalization period to more assertive and independent depictions in the post-liberalization period.

The study is divided into nine sections. Section 1 contains the document's introduction. Section 2 presents a literature review on the influence of social competence and emotional intelligence in secondary students. Section 3 defines the parameters of the study. Section 4 delineates the objectives, while Section 5 articulates the hypothesis of the study. Section 6 analyzed the research methodology. Section 7 contains a comprehensive presentation of the empirical results. Section 8 has succeeded with a discussion of the results. Section 9 comprises the conclusions. References have been incorporated.

Literature Review

• Pre-Liberalization Era: Female Representation in Indian Cinema

The representation of women in Hindi cinema, which is the main motif in a multitude of studies, has undergone a significant transformation due to the liberalization of the economy. **Mitra and Singh (2025)** have shown the major changes during the period post-independence till today in a comprehensive manner, which is indicative of the fact that globalization and economic factors have indeed altered both the gender roles in cinema. The metamorphosis is very visible in the works of **Zafar and Batta (2017)**, which focused on the new woman in re-constructing the liberated Indian cinema. Traditional female characters have been shifted to more independent, career-oriented women, which mirrors the general societal transformation. **Bose (2019)** goes on to say that contemporary Indian women filmmakers self-use cinema, reshaping the notion of female sexuality in means that break the set stereotypes and thus generate the space where the postcolonial sexual identity can be explored.

Consequently, these studies illustrate how the economic factors and the different discourses of culture result in the reconfiguration of gender and desire in Hindi cinema. **Khan and Taylor**

(2018) claim that in Bollywood films, women are usually depicted as the prescriptive gender norms, whereas they are rewarded when they are conformed and vice versa. **Shukla (2019)** since its advent in the beginning of last century, the Indian film industry, or “Bollywood,” has played an integral role in both the expression of social frustration, and the formation of national identity. After the 1991 liberalization of the Indian economy, Indians both at home and abroad were faced with a rapidly changing social structure as a changing economic system had its effect on societal norms. **Rathee (2023)** lays stress on the requirement of nuclear identity politics rethinking in Hindi cinema, concentrating on the presentation of diverse queer perspectives.

The study criticizes Hindi cinema for marketing dominant cultural narratives of Indian modernity and contends for a deeper comprehension of how queer female desire can go against these narratives. **Bose (2019)** argues this point by examining the works of women artists like Mira Nair and Gurinde Rajkuma, who openly discuss issues related to female desire and female independence. These filmmakers' have actually walked on the edge of the preoccupied to the representation of women in Indian cinema and provided a different standpoint of sexual identity that challenges patriarchy while creating characters who genuinely express female desire. The body image of women in the Bollywood industry is among the key areas that feminists are focusing on. **Maqbool and Jan (2017)** provide a thorough account of how the shapes of the female body in the Indian film industry have changed by disapproving of the generalization that leads us to the beauty and the beast conclusion of film histories with a failure to grasp the complex multiplicity that they constitute.

- **Post-Liberalization Era: Shifts in Female Narratives**

Mistri and Dasgupta's (2024) examine Bollywood's evolution in aesthetics and socio-politics, highlighting its inadequacy in capturing queer and feminist desires. It calls for a shift in portraying female characters beyond conventional gender norms, addressing female sexual fantasies. The development of female representation in Hindi cinema has been firmly knit with the socio-economic, cultural, and the political transformations of India. In the same way, **Mistri and Dasgupta (2024)** link the male gaze and psychoanalytic feminism to the portrayal of female desire and sexuality in Bollywood. However, recent studies show that this gaze is less persuasive as more female directors and characters challenge societal norms in contemporary cinema. **Sharma and Narban (2016)** as well as **Manzar and Aravind (2019)** study the illustration of the development and change of female portrayals in Hindi cinema through the historical past, its transitions from the passive female characters to the more empowered and independent ones.

The way women were perceived in the workforce and society was predicted on the path of their cinematic representations. This transformation in the first place, the feminine of Bollywood, is an indication of the broader changes in the national economy and society of India. This topic is a junction in the broader discussion on women's commodification, according to **Khan and Taylor (2018)**, **Zafar and Batta (2017)**, who argued those women's bodies, have been historically commoditized to sell an idealized version of femininity so far, but the signs of the change in the portrayal of feminine form in the new cinema are still visible. Films of Bollywood in the recent years have showcased women in a more balanced way, and the subjects have now been highlighted with caste and class issues instead of just gender. **Maqbool and Jan (2017)** bring into focus the growth women have undergone over the years in view of society changes. **Chaturvedi (2023)** and **Bajwa and Singh (2023)** go deeper into the topics of Hindi cinema like marital rape and the inversion of cultural motifs of Westerners. These researches have manifested that the Indian cinema industry is now the stage for social change, addressing not

only gender and sex-related issue but also deconstructing the gender power imbalance that is traditional marital relationship.

The research gap identified by various authors including **Mitra and Singh (2025)**, and **Bose (2019)**, highlights the lack of systematic gendered analysis of female representation in Hindi Cinema during the pre-liberalization era (1950s-1980s). While significant attention has been given to post – 1991 transformation in women’s roles, the liberalization period remains underexplores, particularly through feminist framework. Studies by **Rathee (2023)**, **Khan and Taylor (2018)**, **Mistri and Dasgupta (2024)**, and others show a slide from the traditional passive and objectified female roles to a more empowered, complex, and independent character. The redefinition of female desire and sexuality is influenced by economic liberalization, globalization, and the influence of male and female filmmakers. Contemporary Bollywood offers opportunities to reevaluate patriarchal narratives and promote gender equality and sexual rights. It addresses themes of consent, gender violence, and women's rights, fostering a discourse on female empowerment. The interaction of cinema, sex, and socio-economic changes allows for further exploration of how Bollywood can maintain its role in reflecting and producing social attitudes towards women, desire, and sexuality in modern India.

Specifically, the issues outlined above investigated in the context of Indian films of two periods – pre-and post-liberalization phase and both Bollywood and regional films will be considered for analyses. Finally, the study investigates how women are depicted, and what such depictions mean concerning the culture and society of the show. The representations are going to be discussed with reference to feminism and post-colonialism and culture and media studies, especially within the context of colonialism and globalization. In view of the foregoing aims, the study is an empirical investigation of the ways and manner in which Indian cinema has portrayed the feminine ideal at different periods, across different genres and regions.

Future research has the potential to delve into several areas, including intersectional portrayals of women in classic Hindi Films, the use of cinema as a nationalistic tool and the representation of the female agency in mythological and historical genres. And future research needs to do Comparative analysis between pre- and post-liberalization representations to track shifts in ideologies around gender, sexuality, and identity.

Objectives

- To examine the portrayal of the feminine ideal in Indian films during the pre-liberalization era.
- To analyze the portrayal of the feminine ideal in Indian films during the post-liberalization era.
- To compare and contrast the shift of portrayal of the feminine ideal in Indian films between the pre and post liberalization eras.

Hypothesis

H1: Indian films during the pre-liberalization era predominantly depicted the feminine ideal as submissive, self-sacrificial, and oriented towards traditional family roles.

H2: Indian films post-liberalization depict the feminine ideal as independent, modern, and empowered, reflecting societal shifts towards gender equality and individualism, moving from traditional passive representations to assertive, autonomous depictions.

Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative method to analyze female characters and how they have been pictured in the Indian film industry following and during the liberalization period. It focuses female characters' perception of the world, their socially, and culturally embedded contexts, and narrative changes in time perspectives. The analysis of the study is explanatory and descriptive and gives an in-depth portrait of female narratives in Indian cinema. It can also look into the making of these images and their changes in time, as it do via the querying of the types of social, political, and economic factors that have played a role and the broader national changes that they are related to. The sampling method employed is purposive sampling, which is commonly used in Qualitative research. This technique allows selection of data - Using secondary data, the study examines nine films, three from the pre-liberalization era (*Mother India*, *Tulsi Tere Angan Ki*, *Seeta Aur Geeta*) and six from the post-liberalization period (*Queen*, *Pink*, *Thappad*, *Kiran Bedi*, *No One Killed Jessica*, *English Vinglish*). Through this exploration, the study attempts to know the specific relationship between Indian women's practices, acts, and social beliefs and the rapid changes in socio-political and financial backgrounds of India, so to give a better view of women's evolving stories that have generally become stronger and more confident in the post-liberalization of Indian cinema. The analytical framework draws from narrative analysis and content analysis to examine the characters, storyline, dialogues and socio-cultural themes related to women. The theoretical framework is collected by feminist films theory, and socio-cultural theory. The study relies on secondary data including, the films, articles and media analysis.

Result Based on objective

Objective 1: To examine the portrayal of the feminine ideal in Indian films during the pre-liberalization era.

In the pre-liberalization period, the Indian cinema showed a feminine ideal resting on ageless, traditional values indicative of what were the societal expectations of women as the nurturers of family, self-sacrificing, and morally upright figures. In the film *Mother India* (1957), the main actress, Radha is depicted as the true Indian woman - a devoted mother, a loyal wife, and above all, a figure of great moral strength. Radha does not lose her devotion to her duties, despite the fact that she is in a situation of ultimate deprivation, in which poverty is followed by the loss of her husband, and so on. Her character has a strong connection too, in addition to teaching her to be a virtuous person who possesses patience, sacrifice, and nor gives up easily. The famous line, "*Mujhe mere desh ki mitti ki kasam, main apne farz se peechhe nahin hatoongi*" ("I swear on the soil of my country, I will not back down from my duty"), confirms the film's glorification of a woman's absolute commitment to her family and country. Moreover, the movie *Tulsi Tere Angan Ki* (1978) reaffirms the feminine icon by women as loving and obedient human beings. Tulsi, the main character is like a mother and wife who fit the ideal image by putting her family's welfare first. The film carries out the concept that a girl is worthy as long as she can bear the suffering of other people. Tulsi herd the traditional way of living with marriage and trusted Yunus to convey the message that women in the 80's would usually act. The dialogue, "*Aurat hone ka farz nibhana aasaan nahin hai*" ("Fulfilling the duty of being a woman is not easy"), sums up the pressure that is placed on women if they want to keep their family honor and values, also it reaffirms the idea that they are responsible for the nurturing and supporting. On the other hand, *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972) generates a bicameral depiction of the feminine gender through the presentation of two diametrically opposed female characters - the gentle Seeta and the forceful Geeta. Where Seeta is the archetype of the compliant woman, Geeta is the representation

of an evolving feminine identity, which she embodies through her courage and obstinacy. The movie besides comparing these two characteristics of a woman also captures the struggle between the traditional societal expectations and the wish for freedom of the characters. Despite Geeta's revolt against the wrongdoings, the narrative is reluctant to endorse this view and suggests that even women with strong wills have to adapt to societal norms to some extent. The dialogue, "*Aurat sirf roti nahin banati, zaroorat pade toh ladti bhi hai*" ("A woman does not just cook; when needed, she also fights"), symbolizes the slow change in the way women are seen, from being mothers only to both nurturing and self-protective beings.

Objective 2: To analyze the portrayal of the feminine ideal in Indian films during the post-liberalization era.

The post-liberalization period of Indian cinema shows a big change in the portrayal of the feminine ideal, changing societal attitudes toward women's autonomy and empowerment. Films like *Thappad* (2020) smashed the old stories that justify domestic violence and defended the right of women to respect through a dignity-centered approach. The movie's main character, Amrita, rejects even one slap from her husband, arguing that it signifies silent abuse. She expresses her self-respect through a powerful dialogue, "*Bas ek Thappad, par nahi maar sakta.*" This portrayal challenges the notion of women's sanctity in marriage, emphasizing their personal worth over marital duty. In the *Pink* (2016), the female ideal is also redefined through the lens of consent and personal autonomy. The film challenges societal norms and emphasizes the importance of honoring women's opinions and choices, regardless of societal advice. The film follows three self-sufficient women who resist harassment and demand respect, with "*No means no*" being a famous dialogue promoting women's independence. The films *Queen* (2013) and *English Vinglish* (2012) shed light on the theme of self-exploration and empowerment as a result of personal development. For Rani in *Queen*, the evolution of her character from a quiet girl to an independent, bold woman is the beginning of a new feminine ideal that stands on her sense of self-reliance and courage. The words she says, "*Mujhe yeh sab aata hai, main ekdum perfect hoon*" ("I know all this, I am completely perfect"), prove to be her affirming thoughts on her self-esteem. In the same way, Shashi's quest to master English in *English Vinglish* is seen as the first step in overcoming the vicious chain of patriarchal beliefs that tender the worth of a woman to only her skills in domesticity. Those pictures envision the current woman, who opts for the realization of oneself, not only through the family roles but by self-improvement at work. *No One Killed Jessica* (2011) and *Kiran Bedi* (2005) are examples of real-life stories that display women as catalysts of transformation and justice. The representation of Sabrina Lal's struggle for justice in *No One Killed Jessica* stands as a challenge to the sexist portrayal of women as mere victims that do nothing to change their situation. She is unstoppable in her commitment to bring the powerful to justice, and this is clearly reflected in the saying, "*Justice late is justice denied,*" which states the ideal of the resilient and the morally responsible woman. In the same manner that, *Kiran Bedi* (2005) also praises the real-life story of the first female IPS officer, in India, showcasing an example where women break down the barriers and redefine the relationship between a gender and leadership. These stories serve as the first signs of a paradigm shift in the femininity concept to one that is comprised of strength, intelligence, and the boldness to defy the mainstream.

Discussion

The representation of feminine perfection in Indian cinema has been strictly traditional during the pre-liberalization period. Women were primarily portrayed as self-sacrificing, nurturing, and

morally upright figures that owed their worth and identity to the family roles they played. Shukla (2019) corroborates this notion by mentioning that Hindi cinema had always been a prime source of national identity building that was often achieved by women characters, who exemplified the virtues of motherhood, chastity, and resilience. Films like *Mother India* (1957) were the best examples of this ideal through characters like Radha, who stood for kindness, patience, resilience, and loyalty. Her ultimate ups and downs in her attempt at upholding justice made it clear that the woman's primary responsibility was to help her family and community, even if it means her personal cost. In the same way, *Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki* (1978) confirmed this by showing females as bearers of familial honor who patiently bore their personal suffering for the welfare of others. This aligns with Khan and Taylor (2018) who say that before liberalism, Bollywood films were primarily the supporters of prescribed gender norms and the appreciators of women who compliantly carried out traditional roles. In turn, the movies prescribed feminine virtue as authority and abstinence.

Even films like *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972), which had the two extremes of femininity, were not able to untie the traditional view that a woman's strength and defiance should be in line with the society of norms and familial obligations. Geeta advocated for boldness, which may be regarded as a potential aspect of female empowerment. In contrast, the post-liberal era marked a notable shift in the portrayal of the feminine ideal, which served as the reflection of the more general societal changes and the growing recognition of women's autonomy and individuality. Maqbool and Jan (2017) also shed new light on the issue by analyzing the Bollywood female body, which was not only presented as a sexual, ideal figure and was limited to the narrow beauty standards that were compatible with patriarchal. So, the films made before liberalization had set up strict morals of beautiful and good women and this, in its turn, had led to the oppression of the variety of female experiences.

According to Sharma and Narban (2016) and Manzar and Aravind (2019), the evolutionary process is also apparent in the general acceptance of women in societal roles and professions. Correspondingly, the depiction of women has been transforming in the film industry, where they are not only portrayed as nurturers but also as self-reliant persons with aspirations and moral rights. *Thappad* (2020) and *Pink* (2016), for example, bring into question the accepted narrative by arguing in favor of the rights, dignity, and freedom of women. Besides, such movies as *Queen* (2013) and *English Vinglish* (2012) redefine the female ideal by way of the characters' journey to self-discovery and the subsequent empowerment. Rani's evolution from a submissive bride to a charismatic self-sufficient lady in *Queen* contradicts the traditional societal view that a woman gets acquainted with her worth only through tying the knot. The portrayals reflect what Mitra and Singh (2025) identify as a fundamental metamorphosis in gender roles brought about liberalization. The films based on actual events like *No One Killed Jessica* (2011) and *Kiran Bedi* (2005) further extend the feminine ideal by showing women as the protagonists of change and justice. The post-liberal landscape's movies portray women as self-sufficient individuals capable of shaping their destinies, moving beyond the martyr archetype. They emphasize the sacrifice of autonomy, fighting for rights, and accountability to defy society, departing from the traditional portrayal of women in the pre-liberal era. Chaturvedi (2023) and Bajwa and Singh (2023) talk about new trends in Indian movies such as marital rape and how the Western cultural tropes are being reversed, this not only shakes the traditionally based gender roles and stirs the debate of the power-to-consent and marital characteristics, but also they identify a visible change to a more active self-respect. Moreover, Zafar and Batta (2017) argue that the rise of awareness about intersecting issues such as caste and class of women and gender, along with the post-

The study has shown that before liberalization, the Indian film industry projected women as self-sacrificing, nurturing figures who were rooted in tradition. On the other hand, post liberalization, cinema has depicted women as autonomous, self-aware, and empowered individuals. The shift aligns with socio-economic changes and evolving gender norms in India. The latest studies thus corroborate this transformation, shedding light on the increased female empowerment and various levels of their characters in present-day cinema.

Conclusion

The study explores the transformation of the feminine ideal in Indian cinema, from the pre-liberalization period to the post-liberalization period. In pre-liberalization films, women's characters were usually shown as obedient, self-sacrificing persons who are only devoted to their families' duty and moral strength. These images allowed the traditional cultural norms to stay like Radha's character in *Mother India* and the character of Tulsi in *Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki*. At the same time, the post-liberalization era represents a drastic change since both film and society began to characterize female protagonists as self-motivated and self-actualized ones. We can see that the movies like *Thappad*, *Pink*, and *Queen* would tell the story, which focuses on the position of woman relative to herself, her respect for herself, and the necessity of personal progress. Real-life stories like the ones of *No One Killed Jessica* and *Kiran Bedi* add a strong argument that the portrayal of women in Indian cinema has changed significantly over time, from a passive role to an active agent of change and empowerment. The shift witnessed in this area is in line with the general movement aimed at the need for gender balance and the changing the role of women in India. The shift from pre-to post-liberalization characterizations of women's ideal in Indian movies is visible not just on the screen but also is verified by the scholarly community of the present. The previous portrayal of women was that of mothers and caregivers who were at all times docile and protectors of the existing traditions, in line with nationalism and the patriarchal societal model. Nevertheless, current films give women more visibility and power, and show them as self-reliable, forward, and having many qualities, which also represents wider societal gender conscious changes.

References

- Agarwal, R. (2014). Changing roles of women in Indian cinema. In *Silpakorn University Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts* (Vols. 14–2, pp. 117–132).
<https://www.thaiscience.info/journals/Article/SUIJ/10969014.pdf>
- Bajwa, S. S., & Singh, S. P. (2023). Societal echoes on screen: Marital rape depictions in Indian Cinema's transition. *ACADEMICIA: An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 13(8), 7-14.
- Bose, B. (2019). Transgressions: Female Desire and Postcolonial Identity in Contemporary Indian Women's Cinema. In *Interventions* (pp. 119-133). Routledge.
- Chatterji, S. A. (2013). The evolution of representing female sexuality in Hindi cinema 1991–2010. In *Routledge handbook of Indian cinemas* (pp. 178-192). Routledge.
- Chaturvedi, V. G. (2023). Representation Of Women in Popular Hindi Cinema and The Construction of Indian National Identity. *IJRAR-International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, 10(4), 673-679.
- G, A. & Anu Celly. (2021). Analyzing Portrayal of women in Bollywood Cinema. *Journal of Mass Communication & Journalism*, 2–4. <https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/analyzing-portrayal-of-women-in-bollywood-cinema.pdf>
- Geena Davis Institute. (2024, April 20). The Impact of Gender Representation in Indian Films page -

- Geena Davis Institute. <https://geenadavisinstitute.org/research/the-impact-of-gender-representation-in-indian-films/>
- Gupta, P. (2022). *Changing Trends in the Portrayal of Women in Hindi Cinema: A Historical Study* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Hindu College Gazette Web Team. (2023). *Changing face of women's representation in Hindi cinema*. HCG. <https://www.hinducollegegazette.com/post/changing-face-of-women-s-representation-in-hindi-cinema>
- Jain A. (2024), *A millennial watches Ramesh Sippy's Seeta Aur Geeta: A story of identical twins which is laugh-out-loud funny*, the Indian express, <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/a-millennial-watches-ramesh-sippys-seeta-aur-geeta-hema-malini-7735758/>
- Jha, P. (2014). REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA: ANALYSIS OF ITEM SONGS. *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, 191–199. <http://www.universitypublications.net/hssr/0304/pdf/H4V60.pdf>
- Joshi L. (2020), *WOMEN, CINEMA AND THE INDIAN NATION: A HISTORICAL SURVEY*, https://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/Women_Studies/Gender_Studies/03_Women_and_History/33.1._Women,_Cinema_and_the_Indian_Nation_a_historical_survey/et/8033_et_ET_33.pdf
- Kasturi, S. (2018). Ethnocentrism in Hindi Cinema: Has depiction of superiority of Indian culture changed since post-independence to Post Liberalization Period?. *The Creative Launcher*, 3(1), 210-220.
- Khan, S., & Taylor, L. (2018). Gender policing in mainstream Hindi cinema: A decade of central female characters in top-grossing Bollywood movies. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 22-22.
- Kumar, A. (2022). Representation of dalits in Hindi cinema after liberalization. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 2455328X221082484.
- Manzar, B., & Aravind, A. (2019). (Re) Thinking women in cinema: The changing narrative structure in Bollywood. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 17(1), 1-13.
- Maqbool, T., & Jan, S. (2017) *PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE BODY IN INDIAN CINEMA: A REFLECTION*.
- Mathai, S. (2015). Indian television in the eras of pre-liberalisation and liberalisation. *Media Watch*, 6(2), 255-268.
- Mistri, S., & Dasgupta, R. (2024). Evolution of Female Desire and Fantasy in Bollywood Cinema: Perspectives from Male and Female Directors in the Post-Liberalization Era. *Critical South Asian Studies*, 2(1), 33-47.
- Mitra, D. P., & Singh, A. (2025) *Transformation in Indian society and culture: A sociological examination of parallel trends in Indian cinema*.
- Mukherjee, A. N., Mukherjee, K., & Mukherjee, A. (2020). A comparative study of depiction of feminism on Indian celluloid in pre- and post-liberalisation era: tribute to a visionary maestro. *International Journal of Indian Culture and Business Management*, 20(3), 342. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijicbm.2020.107692>
- Preetha, M. M., & Balagopal, A. (2020). 'Pravaas' on Celluloid: Representation of South Asian Diaspora in Select Post-Nineties Bollywood Cinema (Doctoral dissertation, PG Department of English and Research Centre Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, University of Calicut.).
- Rathee, S. (2023). *Queering Indian Celluloid: Towards a Genealogy of Non-Heteronormative Female Desire in Hindi Cinema and Bollywood, 1998–2018* (Doctoral dissertation, Murdoch University).
- Safarnama, V. a. P. B. S. (2019). *Mother India: Imagining nation as a woman*. Shehari Safarnama. <https://sheharisafarnama.home.blog/2019/09/15/mother-india-imagining-nation-as-a-woman/>

- Sail S.G. (2023), Post Liberalisation Critical Analysis of Women-Centric Films in Hindi Cinema, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 28, Issue 2, Series 8 (February, 2023) 55-120, <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.28-Issue2/Ser-8/H28020855120.pdf>
- Shah, P. V. (2020). Representation of women and identity in Bollywood films. <https://doi.org/10.25417/uic.13475046.v1>
- SHARMA S., (2016). Indian Cinema and women. In IJARIE: Vol. Vol-2 (Issue Issue-1, pp. 491–492) [Journal-article]. http://ijarie.com/AdminUploadPdf/Indian_Cinema_and_Women_ijarie1615.pdf
- Sharma, S., & Narban, J. S. (2016). Indian Cinema and Women. International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education, 2(1), 491-494.
- Shukla D. (2019), LIBERALIZATION AND ITS EFFECT ON HINDI CINEMA 2019 JETIR, Volume 6, Issue 3 <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1903649.pdf>
- Zafar S. and Batta A. (2017) Liberalization and Changing Representation of Women in Hindi Cinema, Indian Journal of Science and Technology, Vol 10(46), DOI: 10.17485/ijst/2017/v10i46/115859,