

Unveiling Gender: Hindi Popular Cinema And The Shaping Of Identity

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Abstract

Identities are fluid and dynamic, constantly shaped by the discourses that surround us. They are not fixed entities but rather evolving constructions that vary over time. Among the foundational elements of identity, sex and sexuality play crucial roles. These aspects have been recognized as fundamental components that contribute to shaping who we are.

Identity formation occurs within the realm of representation, meaning that how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by others is deeply intertwined with the discourses and frameworks available to us. It is through these representations that identities are constructed and negotiated. In contemporary society, mass media occupies a prominent position as a primary site for the production and dissemination of discourses that influence the construction of gender identities. Media outlets, such as television, film, advertising, and social media platforms, heavily contribute to the portrayal and interpretation of gender roles and norms. Consequently, they play a significant role in shaping our understanding and perception of gender identity.

This article highlights on the feminine identities as constructed and represented in various genres of Hindi cinema across decades.

Keywords: Representation, Identity, Discourse, Hindi Cinema, Gendered identities, Sex, and sexualities.

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I. Introduction

Foucault suggests that discourses play a significant role in shaping our perceptions of the world and our own identities (Gauntlett, 2002, p.133). According to Foucault (1977), discourses represent specific ways of communication. However, discourses are not simply descriptions of objects; instead, they actively construct and conceal their own creation. Discourse encompasses not only spoken language but also written language and visual forms, such as books, newspapers, magazines, movies, and television, which are all part of the discourse in modern societies. Essentially, discourse represents the narration of reality as it is presented to us through media and other cultural texts (Newbold et al., 2002).

Consequently, this article aims to examine Hindi popular cinema as a platform where gender identities are performed and expressed.

II. Social Identities

Before examining the construction of gender identities in Hindi cinema, it is important to understand how identities are viewed from a sociological perspective. A social identity refers to the part of an individual's self-concept that is derived from their perceived membership in a specific social group. When studying self and identity from a sociological standpoint, it is assumed that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society (Stryker, 1980). The self-influences society through individual actions, which give rise to groups, organizations, networks, and institutions. Conversely, society influences the self through shared language and meanings, allowing individuals to take on the role of others, engage in social interactions, and reflect upon themselves as objects. This reflective process, known as reflexivity, forms the core of selfhood. Since the self emerges within and reflects society, understanding the self and its identities sociologically requires an understanding of the societal context in which the self operates, recognizing that multiple selves coexist within this social context (Stryker, 1980).

From a sociological perspective, identities can be understood along various axes. The most prominent ones include gender, ethnicity, class, caste, language, age, disability, and sexuality. In addition to these dominant axes, there are other dimensions of identity such as education, urban or rural residency, cultural background, and so on. However, gender has consistently remained central to one's identity. According to Shaughnessy (2008), sex

and gender are fundamental ways in which individuals categorize themselves and others. The response to the question "Who am I?" often begins with "I am a man" or "I am a woman" (Shaughnessy, 2008). Davies (1993) also emphasizes that the division of individuals into male and female is crucial in discussions of identity. Gender identities are commonly understood in terms of masculinity and femininity, but it is important to acknowledge and consider other identities along the gender spectrum as well.

In the following section, we will explore how media, in general, and cinema construct gender identities.

III. Why media matters?

When discussing the production of identity, Stuart Hall (1990) argues that identity is always formed within the realm of representation, rather than existing independently of it. In other words, we cannot escape the influence of the representations of gender that surround us, as they shape our understanding and construction of gendered identities. Barker Chris (2003) emphasizes that identity is a culturally specific creation and that identities are entirely constructed within social and cultural representations. The building blocks for an identity project, such as language and cultural practices, are inherently social in nature. Judith Butler (1999), a feminist writer, adds that representation not only holds meaning within a political process but also serves a normative function in language, either revealing or distorting what is assumed to be true. Representations utilise different signs to generate meaning within a specific context known as discourse. These signs are part of a larger discourse. Mass media has been identified as a primary site of discourse that influences culture, individuals, social structures, and political policies, reflecting social, political, and intellectual perspectives and attitudes (Mcnamara, 2006).

According to Gauntlett (2002), media and communications play a central role in modern life, and gender and sexuality remain at the core of how we perceive our identities. In contemporary societies, people consume a significant number of media, which exposes them to a wealth of information. These experiences have an impact on individuals. Cinema presents numerous images of women, men, and messages about gender and sexuality. It is highly unlikely that these ideas and representations would have no effect on our own sense of identity. It is natural for individuals to emulate or adopt aspects of their identities from the media, including cinema. The media presents situations and relationships from the perspective of others, influencing how we perceive and understand ourselves.

IV. Methodology: Material

Cinema, as a widely consumed form of communication, can challenge established norms while also reinforcing them. This section primarily focuses on how cinema constructs gender identities by either subverting or reaffirming the existing normative order. To explore this, we will primarily examine the most popular films of the past few decades as part of the broader discourse. The paper mainly uses the contextual reading of the popular films.

It is important to acknowledge that there are emerging genres that portray women in more rational and egalitarian ways, acknowledging their legitimate sexual desires, showcasing their career choices as integral aspects of their identities, addressing violence against women realistically, and advocating for women's rights in feminist ways. However, it must be acknowledged that these films are in the minority and cater to a specific audience, therefore not representing the dominant discourse. On the other hand, popular cinema contributes to the construction of a dominant ideology, which tends to be Hindu, patriarchal, and aligned with the upper caste and upper middle-class perspectives. This dominant ideology has a profound and enduring impact on the formation of identities, particularly gender identities. As mentioned earlier, identities are not developed independently of representations but within the framework of cultural representations. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the representations within popular discourse, as they hold significant influence and leave a lasting impact on the masses. In the following sections the paper will mainly emphasise on the construction and representation of femininity. Looking at the scope of this paper, the paper mainly comments on femininity.

V. Discussion: Construction of gender identities in cinema

Hindi cinema has long served as a powerful tool for constructing gender identities, shaping societal perceptions, and reflecting cultural values. However, it often presents a skewed representation of women, perpetuating traditional stereotypes and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Women are frequently portrayed as ethereal beings, admired for their beauty and grace, but rarely given agency or a voice of their own. The narratives predominantly revolve around male protagonists, with women relegated to derivative identities and serving as supporting characters. Rarely do we come across narratives where women's subjectivity takes centre stage, or they are portrayed as central and privileged figures. Instead, they are often depicted as pitiable victims, enduring endless suffering, sacrifice, and restraint. Hindi cinema has woven an elaborate saga of despair and tribulation, showcasing women's lives as an epitome of hardship. One of the iconic examples is "Mother India," where Radha becomes the quintessential figure of a suffering woman. The narrative often culminates in her repentance,

suggesting that women must bear the burden of their circumstances and find redemption through their sacrifice and penance.

The portrayal of women's identities in media, particularly in cinema, is often derived from their association with men. Women are typically depicted as someone's wife, mother, daughter, or daughter-in-law, with very little representation of independence. They are presented in binary roles, either as domestic homemakers or as career-oriented individuals alienated from their domestic responsibilities. Within the private domain, women are predominantly seen as "mothers." When examining the feminine identities depicted in popular cinema, it becomes apparent that they are often "normalised" and "sexualized" rather than "assertive" and "autonomous."

Many movies throughout history have been framed and shaped by patriarchy, which refers to a social system where men hold primary power and dominance. This influence often manifests in the normative portrayal of characters and their roles within narratives. Women have frequently been subjected to sexualized identities, as their appearances and actions are often sculpted through the male gaze and male fantasies.

In this context, women are often objectified and reduced to being arm candy or decorative dolls in movies. They are portrayed as accessories or props for male characters, serving primarily as visual or sexual stimuli rather than fully developed individuals with their own agency and aspirations. Their purpose in these narratives is often centered around the male protagonist's desires or plot progression, rather than being portrayed as complex characters with their own storylines.

Hindi cinema has witnessed several moments where boundaries were challenged, reflecting the changing social and political landscape of India. In the 1930s, films like V. Shantaram's "Duniya Na Mane" and "Admi" emerged as part of the social genre, rooted in a backdrop of social reform. These films aimed to address and critique various societal issues prevalent at the time. However, as the ideal Indian woman was being redefined, chastity and purity were identified as the defining characteristics of traditional Indian women, contrasted with Western women. Women in positions of political power were considered a threat to the purity of Indian women and questioned their femininity. Apprehensions about women losing their feminine identity were expressed widely in legislative assemblies and various popular discourses. These anxieties were vividly depicted in cinema as a popular discourse of the 1930s. For example, in V. Shantaram's films *Amar Jyoti* and *Maya Machindra*, women in positions of political power were portrayed as "masculine," aggressive, and cruel, only to repent for their unnatural behaviour later. The character of Queen Kilottala in *Maya Machindra*, through her "pativrata" identity, accomplishes what the great ascetics Machindranath and Gorakhnath failed to achieve—reviving her dead son. Kilottala realizes that her true essence lies not in attaining political power as a queen but in being an obedient and regulated wife. These women choose to revert to their feminine and motherly instincts as the essence of their identity. Thus, I argue that relinquishing political power ultimately idealizes women as mothers and wives, granting them power through their roles as "mother" and "pativrata" (devoted wife).

Moving into the 1950s, there was a sense of disillusionment regarding individual rights and the fragmented nature of the Indian nation. The romantic genre gained prominence and became the mainstream and most popular genre during this period. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) also played a significant role in shaping the narratives of Hindi cinema. Films such as "Awara," "Shree 420," "Sujata," "Devadas," "Do Bheega Zameen," "Pyassa," and "Kagaz Ke Phool" emerged during this time, strongly commenting on social realities, and addressing various social issues.

One notable film from this era is "Mr. and Mrs. 55," which mockingly depicted the Hindu Code Bill. This film served as a satirical commentary on the proposed legislation, which aimed to reform and codify Hindu personal law. It showcased the resistance and opposition that such progressive reforms faced, shedding light on the prevailing conservative attitudes of society.

These moments in Hindi cinema not only entertained but also acted as a reflection of the society they were produced in. They challenged societal norms, commented on social realities, and addressed important issues. They played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and creating awareness about various aspects of Indian society. Through their narratives, Hindi cinema has continued to be a powerful medium for social commentary and cultural expression.

The portrayal of women in Hindi cinema has often involved making boundaries and placing limits on their moral and sexual freedom. This can be attributed to the influence of Brahmanical Victorian ideology, which emphasizes societal expectations and conservative values.

Films like "Gumrah" present a narrative where the female protagonist, Meena, finds herself drifting uncontrollably into a sexual relationship with her ex-lover. Eventually, she confesses her infidelity to her husband and makes the choice to stay with him, despite the transgression. This moment of resistance showcases Meena's agency and her decision to confront her actions while actively participating in the resolution of her own story. Similarly, in "Sangam," the character Radha faces a dilemma between her husband and her ex-lover. Rajendra Kumar's character resolves this dilemma in a tragic manner by sacrificing himself. While this may seem like a reaffirmation of the normative, it also raises questions about the limitations imposed on women's choices and agency within societal norms.

These moments in Hindi cinema, both in "Gumrah" and "Sangam," serve as points of reflection on the societal expectations placed upon women. While they may sometimes uphold the normative framework, they also provide glimpses of resistance and introspection. They highlight the complexities of women's lives and the struggle between societal expectations and individual desires.

It is important to critically analyse these portrayals and continue challenging the boundaries imposed on women's moral and sexual wandering. By promoting narratives that offer more diverse and empowering perspectives on women's experiences, Hindi cinema can contribute to a more inclusive and progressive society.

In Hindi cinema, there is often a dichotomy between Dharma (duty) and Desire. This is reflected in the portrayal of women and the expectations placed upon them. The idealized woman is often depicted as submissive, self-sacrificing, chaste, and sexually controlled. Her role is seen as fulfilling traditional gender norms, where love is considered a duty for procreativity. She is expected to be a dutiful and loyal wife, finding fulfilment primarily through motherhood.

On the other hand, the "bad woman" is portrayed as individualistic, sexually aggressive, Westernized, and unwilling to make sacrifices. Love for her is often depicted as purely sexual passion, devoid of societal expectations. This archetype is commonly associated with characters such as prostitutes or courtesans, who are seen as repositories of sterile sexuality that can potentially endanger family and social order.

Marriage is often portrayed as a regulatory measure, meant to maintain societal norms and control female sexuality. Women are expected to conform to these ideals and play specific roles within the institution of marriage, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics and societal expectations.

It is important to recognize that these portrayals are not representative of the diversity of women's experiences and identities. They perpetuate stereotypes and limit the scope of female characters in Hindi cinema.

In my previously published article, I argued that the portrayal of women in post-1990s cinema depicts them as educated and modern, yet they consistently choose tradition over modernity in most situations (Diwakar, 2023). These traditions are not imposed on them; instead, they are portrayed as their own "choice." Films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (HAHK), *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (HSSH), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G), and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ) represent women as mothers, wives, sisters, and sisters-in-law, defining their identity solely in relation to men. These women are primarily portrayed as housewives, and although occasional references are made to their educational qualifications and careers, these aspects are never given prominence—they are never shown in their workplaces. For instance, Madhuri Dixit's character in HAHK is a computer scientist, but she is never depicted near a computer screen. Similarly, Sonali Bendre's character in HSSH is a doctor, but her true worth is measured by her ability to make *gajar ka halwa* (a sweet dessert) for Salman Khan. These women, confined within the domestic sphere, acknowledge that being a "sidhi-sadhi" (simple, undemanding) woman is the primary qualification for achieving "status" within the family.

Another crucial aspect of female characters is their obedience, both within and outside the home. Prior to marriage, women are expected to be obedient daughters within their families. For example, Kajol's character in DDLJ seeks permission from her father for a one-month independent life, and Tabu's character in *Cheeni Kum* seeks approval to marry a man who does not conform to societal norms. Although there are differences in their portrayal, both characters ultimately conform to the same identity of being caring and obedient daughters. Tabu's character has the potential to challenge norms and make independent decisions regarding her choice of partner, defying traditional expectations of a "correct match." However, in the end, both Tabu and Kajol achieve their desires—permission to marry the men they love—but only by being ideal obedient daughters. Popular discourse also highlights the consequences of non-obedience, often depicting repentant daughters or even honour killings. Consequently, popular cinema reinforces the notion that obedience is the critical trait for being a good wife after marriage.

VI. Conclusion

Whether it is Kajol and Jaya Bachchan in K3G, Madhu in *Roja*, or numerous other films across genres, women's primary identity is often emphasized as obedient, caring, and supportive wives. Even in today's context, popular discourse continues to depict women in binary roles—either as obedient wives within the private sphere or conforming to parameters set for men within the public sphere. In a different approach, films like *Ki* and *Ka* naively address the issue of women's essential role as obedient housewives and mothers by simply subverting the order—depicting women as breadwinners and men as househusbands, women as rational and men as emotional. While it challenges the sexual division of labour to some extent, it superficially fails to address the fact that most women do not have a choice in accepting or rejecting the role of a housewife. Many Indian girls are raised with the expectation that they do not have to prove themselves as breadwinners, as they are considered incapable of surviving and earning in a competitive world. Consequently, they must rely on their future husbands as providers, and being a housewife is seen as a natural choice.

While it is important to note that not all movies adhere to these norms and that the film industry has been evolving in recent years with more diverse and nuanced portrayals of women, the influence of patriarchy and the

objectification of women persist in many mainstream movies. These portrayals can reinforce harmful stereotypes and perpetuate the unequal power dynamics between men and women.

It is crucial to continue challenging these norms and promoting more inclusive and empowering representations of women in cinema. This includes creating complex, multidimensional female characters, offering opportunities for women to tell their own stories, and encouraging diverse perspectives both behind and in front of the camera. By doing so, the film industry can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society.

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