

# **Women Written by Bollywood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Critical Study**

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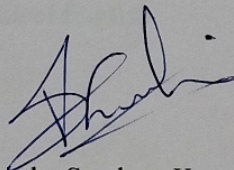
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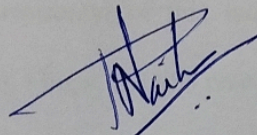
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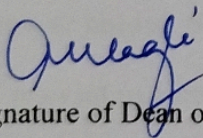


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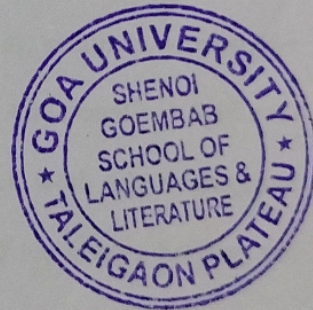


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Ms. Vrutha Sandeep Karmali



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## **ABSTRACT**

The dissertation titled “Women Written by Bollywood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Critical Study” examines the evolution of women’s representation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Bollywood films (mainstream Hindi cinema) while looking at a combination of ten films directed by male and female directors. The purpose of this study is to highlight Bollywood’s treatment of its female characters and tackle the main question: are women still treated as objects by Bollywood or has the representation changed over the years? Hence, this study provides an overview of the portrayal of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting from the silent age of Hindi cinema to the late 90s, to identify the difference in women’s representation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To do so, this research heavily relies on Laura Mulvey’s feminist film theory and Alison Bechdel’s Bechdel Test. While analysing the chosen films from a feminist lens, a comparative study between films directed by male and female directors is conducted to understand whether the gender of the filmmaker affects their representation of women on screen. Lastly, this dissertation focuses on the evolution of women’s representation in Bollywood songs, specifically, ‘item numbers’ and problematizes the term.

**KEYWORDS** : Women, Representation, Bollywood, Feminist Film Theories, Item, Evolution



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.*

~Simone de Beauvoir

Despite the first wave of feminism dating back to the 1940s, its relevance today is undeniable. A feminist study can be conducted in any given field whether it be the corporate world, education system or even the entertainment industry. The history of women's struggle and their pursuit of equal rights and freedom gives one an insight into inequalities persisting in the male dominated society. Works of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Mary Wollstonecraft are foundational in the Western feminist movement. As the waves of feminism progressed they became inclusive of women belonging to different communities and races, therefore the problems addressed during the third and the fourth wave of feminism are all-encompassing. The pace and phases of feminism in India differed from that of the Western feminism. Issues of dowry, caste system, untouchability, right to education and marriage, and domestic violence became the core issues taken up by the Indian feminists. Savitribai Phule and Tarabai Shinde are two of the most prominent Indian feminists. Through their work they tried to eliminate these social evils and advocate for an egalitarian society.

This analysis is an amalgamation of women's studies, gender studies, feminist studies and film studies. Cinema described as the 'Advanced Representation System' by Laura Mulvey in her critical essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (70s) has become an integral part of human life. It is an instant source of entertainment and pleasure. However, the film industry has been mainly concentrated with male directors, writers and filmmakers. For a long time films were all about the 'hero' while the 'heroine' played a subsidiary role. It's only until recently that

women have entered this scene and the concept of ‘female centric films’ has been established. Hence, it is necessary to trace the evolution of female representation in an industry which is still largely male centric. Elaine Showalter, the founder of Gynocriticism, aimed at creating a framework to highlight women’s writings in a male dominated industry. For ages in the writing scene, literature was written by men. Women were compelled to adopt a pseudonym to publish their writings. Even Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* talks about the unequal opportunities given to men and women (20s). She creates an imaginary sister of Shakespeare and questions whether she would have received the same opportunities and fame as him. Therefore it becomes crucial for feminist critics to highlight works created by women. Likewise, the debate about female characters written by men vs female characters written by women has been going on for years. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* that Victorian men portrayed women as either an ‘angel’ or the ‘monster’. Any characters that didn’t fit the female archetypes would be rejected and categorised as unconventional. This debate shall be touched upon in this analysis as well from the director’s point of view. Similarly, a Bechdel test of the chosen films shall be conducted to understand the representation of women in the same. The Bechdel test is a landmark invention by Alison Bechdel which measures the portrayal of women in cinema and fiction. Bechdel introduced the test for the first time in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*; since then the test has been utilised by film critics and feminists to evaluate the representation of women in films especially in the 2000s. Bechdel attributed the idea of this test to her friend Liz Wallace and the writings of Virginia Woolf. Despite the efficiency of the test in measuring the presence of female characters in films, it is important to note that the test bears its own limitations as it is a rather quantitative test than qualitative therefore a textual analysis of the screenplay is required.

On the other hand, Mulvey's film criticism was limited to mainstream Hollywood filmography of the 70s. She used psychoanalysis to understand female representation on screen and came up with concepts like the male gaze. So can the concepts discussed by her be applied to Bollywood? This analysis focuses on the application of Mulvey's theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Bollywood films by alluding to the Indian feminist movement. What is Bollywood and why Bollywood? Before analysing the films from a feminist perspective, it is important to understand the genre, its motivations and purpose. Therefore this research shall engage in genre studies as well while referring to the anthology *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*. The element of Masala is central to Bollywood, essentially it's a mix of all film genres. Though the purpose of mainstream Hindi cinema is to entertain the masses, it is certainly a reflection of prevalent dominant ideologies in society such as the patriarchal ideology, moreover, the representation of certain sections in films is guided by the commercial aspect as well. Overall, this research attempts to highlight credible women filmmakers and their contribution to Hindi cinema, examines and compares female representation in Bollywood from the male and female perspectives, criticises stereotyped and objectified portrayal of female characters by both male and female filmmakers and studies the influence of the filmmaker's gender in the outcome of the filmmaking process.

### **1.1 Importance and Reasons for the Proposed Study**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is characterised as the progressive age understanding women's representation in every field is of vital importance. This is true for the entertainment industry as well. Hence, this research aims at analysing women written and directed in Bollywood (mainstream commercial Hindi cinema) by male and female filmmakers. The study will aid in understanding how Bollywood perceives women and their role in the narrative by applying the



Feminist theories such as the feminist film theory coupled with concepts from psychoanalysis. The study will attempt to answer the age-old question of whether individuals of the opposite sex portray the other sex and their experiences accurately by comparing films directed and written by male and female filmmakers. The main aim however is to highlight and appreciate the works of selected Bollywood filmmakers who have portrayed realistic women on screen and condemned stereotypical portrayal of women as the other or an object.

- Films Chosen
  - *Fashion* (2008)
  - *English Vinglish* (2012)
  - *Queen* (2013)
  - *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015)
  - *Veere Di Wedding* (2018)
  - *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019)
  - *Kabir Singh* (2019)
  - *Bulbbul* (2020)
  - *Mimi* (2021)
  - *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* (2023)

## **1.2 Scope and Limitations**

The analysis seeks to examine women's representation by male and female filmmakers and lyricists in selected Bollywood films and songs. The study will be helpful in understanding women's position in the 21st century Hindi film industry. The study is limited to the chosen films and Hindi cinema. This study is limited to analysing female characters and women's representation on screen.

### **1.3 Research Problems/ Questions**

- Has the female representation in Bollywood evolved over the years?
- Does the gender of the filmmaker affect their portrayal of women characters?
- Who is an item? Does Bollywood stereotype and objectify women in the modern day cinema?

### **1.4 Relevance and Necessity of the Proposed Research**

#### **1.4.1 Necessity in the Field of Languages and Literature**

The study advances knowledge in the field of feminism and literature. Language and literature are undoubtedly influenced by various political, cultural, economic and religious ideologies, therefore, it is safe to say that both mimic the social silhouette. By analysing films from a feminist perspective one can reveal the existing prejudice and stigma associated with the marginalised sections while at the same time one can trace the evolution of female representation in films as a result of the feminist movements. Though films are a form of visual narrative, it all starts with a script, the literature. Just like a play, the dialogues used in the chosen films shall be analysed to find the underlying patriarchal themes. Feminist theories shall be extensively used to critique a set of Bollywood films. Since music and dance are an integral part of masala films, the lyrics and picturisation of the same shall be analysed using major feminist literary theories.

#### **1.4.2 Relevance to the Society**

The study is relevant as it aids in understanding the position of women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through films, Hindi Cinema - which is primarily a male dominated industry. Feminism is still very much relevant. Despite the advent of the fourth wave of feminism, inequalities between genders persist even today. Literature and films produced today are a reflection of the same, hence, it is necessary to call out problematic female representation and praise the opposite. It is

necessary to highlight the contribution of Indian filmmakers who have presented an unbiased and realistic image of women which calls for female spectatorship rather than solely satisfying the male gaze. Thus, this study is a contribution to fulfilling one of the 17 global sustainability goals set by UNESCO that is promoting gender equality.

### **1.5 Objectives of Research Proposed**

- To critically examine the representation of women in 21<sup>st</sup> century Bollywood films.
- To understand how the concepts of patriarchy and male gaze work in films.
- To explore whether the gender of the director influences the portrayal of the female body and experiences in their works.
- To highlight and appreciate the contribution of Bollywood filmmakers who have written and portrayed relatable and realistic female characters.
- To highlight and appreciate the advent of female centric projects/narratives in modern day Hindi cinema.

### **1.6 Literature Review**

This literature review provides an insight into the existing research in the field of Bollywood and feminism. Many researchers have chosen this area for their study as analysis of films aids in understanding specific ideologies prevailing in our society. Most researchers focus on the picturisation of female body and sexuality on screen while examining the thematic concerns pertaining to patriarchy and subjugation of women in their chosen films. Hence, the purpose of the proposed research is to add to the existing research on feminism, films and literature.

Laura Mulvey, a seminal film theorist known for her feminist film theory which aided in analysing the role of female characters in the narrative as well as their portrayal on screen, in her



essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* critiques the mainstream Hollywood films of the 70s while exploring the concepts of the male gaze and visual pleasure. With the concept of male gaze she argues that women in cinema are portrayed in a manner that gratifies the psychological/sexual desires of the male spectators. This process leads to objectification of female characters and the actors. She heavily relies on concepts from psychoanalysis such as scopophilia to dig deeper into male psychology. This theory will be used in an Indian context in this study to understand the depiction of women on screen.

Diana Linda in her study on Male Gaze, Women And Indian Cinema: A Feminist Philosophical Exploration works with the ideas of Laura Mulvey, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, and Sartre to analyse a set of chosen Bollywood films. Linda examines the workings of male gaze and patriarchal ideologies in films as a reflection of the same in our society as well as philosophy. In her study she also highlights the resistance seen in certain films towards patriarchy. Furthermore, she also touches upon the question of whether men can write good female characters while analysing the film *Bandit Queen*.

Similarly, in the study titled *Gender Reflections in Mainstream Hindi Cinema* by Nidhi Shendurnikar the debate regarding Hindi cinema's success in portraying 'Indian women from different shades in a society dominated by patriarchal values' is furthered. The role of the 'leading lady' in male centric cinema is questioned here. At the same time, the researcher has elaborated on the progressive and positive evolution taking place in females portrayed with recent films. Likewise the research article, *Bollywood as a site of resistance: Women and Agency in Popular Culture*, as said by Shital Yadav and Smita Jha explores how contemporary Indian cinema redefines women's status and promotes gender-neutral entertainment following the current feminist movements. Hence, here the focus is on the positive changes taking place in

Bollywood with regards to women representation and assertion of their power, agency and equality.

Rucha Vaidya's analysis *Why we need feminism: Analyzing the representation of female body, sexuality and femininity in Bollywood Item songs* specifically focuses on how female body and sexuality are represented in bollywood item songs which she regards as offensive. She argues that in these songs women are highly objectified and stereotyped. She breaks down the study into the four aspects namely the body, the language, the object/subject and commerce to show how these factors affect female portrayal on screen and lyrics. Lastly, the study titled *The evolution of Women in Bollywood films* by Jessica Ramcharran examines women's portrayal in bollywood films ranging from the 1940s to the present day while understanding the history of Bollywood and Feminism. The main argument here is that the portrayal of women has evolved but at a slower pace, however if bollywood becomes more inclusive in its representation of diverse Indian women then the progress will continue.

To conclude research on the evolution of female characters in Bollywood is ongoing. Aside from the representation of the female body and sexuality, the proposed research deals with comparison of a sample of films which are directed by male and female directors. This will provide a different perspective to the existing study on feminism and Bollywood. In the end, the main goal of the study is to praise films which have portrayed good female characters.

### **1.7 Formulation of Hypothesis**

Over the years representation of female characters has gradually evolved in mainstream Bollywood cinema. Differences exist in the ways women and men portray female characters; however, both are capable of displaying relatable, authentic and realistic female characters and their experiences irrespective of their gender.

## **1.8 Research Methodology for Proposed Research**

The analysis relies primarily on Qualitative methodology which includes textual analysis (for the screenplay and lyrics) and visual analysis (direction and cinematography). Mulvey's Feminist film theory will be used to understand the workings of male gaze and visual pleasure (scopophilia). Meanwhile a Bechdel test of the films shall be conducted to understand and measure the representation of women in Indian cinema. The feminist film theory mainly relies on the director's lens in viewing how women are picturised or portrayed on screen while the Bechdel test analyses the significance of female characters and their interaction in the film by answering the following three principal questions;

- Are there more than two female characters in the movie?
- Do they converse with each other?
- Do they talk about anything other than men?

If the film fulfils the above requirements it is deemed to be a “feminist-friendly” film. As for the thematic analysis ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and other feminists, western and Indian, shall be referred to.

## **1.9 Research Design**

### **1.9.1 Chapterization**

- **Introduction**

- The introductory chapter familiarises the reader with the purpose and aim of the study. This chapter establishes the thesis of the project while introducing the research methodology, objectives and its relevance. Additionally, it includes a literature review.



- **Historicising Female Representation in Bollywood: An Alluring Tale**

- This chapter mainly deals with research and studies conducted on Bollywood films produced before the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This chapter serves as an introduction to Bollywood as a genre. In order to understand the evolution of female representation, an overview of the past is required and this chapter serves that purpose.

- **Women Portrayed by Men and Women in Bollywood: An Exploration**

- This is the main analysis chapter which focuses on the in depth analysis of the films chosen. This chapter contains sub-chapters based on the research questions - one of them being the difference between films produced by male and female filmmakers.

- **An Item, An Object and the Other**

- This chapter highlights the objectification of women in Bollywood through music and lyrics. The chapter specifically deals with the term 'item' and attempts to explain and criticise its implications.

- **Conclusion**

- The final chapter includes the synopsis of the entire study and the research findings.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **HISTORICISING THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN BOLLYWOOD: AN ALLURING TALE**

*The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normative narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line.*

~Laura Mulvey

Female characters are often presented merely as a spectacle in films and barely have anything to do with the progress of the plot, especially when it comes to mainstream narrative cinema. Even if they do, their importance to the plot is only measured in relation to their male counterparts. Representation of women in films has been a topic of concern for ages. Laura Mulvey in her seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* critiqued the portrayal of women in mainstream Hollywood cinema of the 70s wherein she argued that women end up becoming the ‘object of the look’ on screen. This leads to various questions; why is representation important in the first place? How does it influence people’s minds and their thinking? This background chapter attempts to answer these questions while introducing Bollywood as a genre and exploring the representation of women in Bollywood.

#### **2.1 Cinema and Representation**

If mainstream cinema is purely for entertainment, then why does representation matter? A question that can be only answered through research and comprehension of the ways in which specific sections of society are represented in films and the influence the represented information has on its viewers. The impact of films goes far beyond one’s understanding. Though they are labelled as unrealistic, fantasies and entertainers they can certainly be considered as mirrored reflections of a given society or the world as a whole. More often than not, literary or visual art

forms perpetuate underlying ideologies, prejudices and stereotypes persisting within the world. Hence, many scholars study, analyse and deconstruct these art forms to understand the hidden themes and propagandas. While explaining the significance of understanding representation of gender in films Jill Nelmes in his work *Introduction to Film Studies* denotes that,

The media re-presents information to its audience, who are encouraged by the mainstream media to see their output as a 'window on the world' as reflecting reality yet the process of representing information is highly complex and highly selective. Many feminists argue that the way notions of gender are represented by the media perpetuates and reinforces the values of patriarchal society... Representation often makes use of stereotypes because they are short hand, quick and easy way of using information (Nelmes 227).

The way a specific gender is represented on screen is influenced by societal prejudices and stereotypes associated with the given gender, thereby shaping and strengthening the viewers' prejudiced beliefs and restricting their understanding of the world. As can be seen the interest in understanding gender and its relationship/ interactions with cinema has kept increasing specially over the last couple of decades. Feminist movements and studies have significantly contributed to this phenomenon. In the field of literature, feminist scholars have particularly critiqued the portrayal of women in narrative fiction including those which are considered to be the ultimate classics. Similarly, studies in the field of cinema in relation to gender have always been a topic of utmost interest. As these art forms are regarded as reflections of society, it is crucial to understand and analyse how these art forms represent social, cultural, economical and political components which includes gender; a social construct. Films are certainly influenced by society and at the same time hold the power to influence society

The same goes for literature; by viewing literary works from different social, cultural or political perspectives one can understand how art imitates and presents reality. Though the two artforms serve as mediums of storytelling, entertainment and information, they bear differences in how they do it. “Films”, as said by Rituparno Ghosh in the introduction to *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*, as an art form embrace both elitist and popular concepts of art and work closely with literary aesthetics. While the verbal and visual aspects of these two art forms may not align perfectly, they interact, complement and rely on each other in a reciprocal and interdependent manner (Jain and Rai 9). The visual medium however, provides a larger scope for varied perspectives; this is made possible by the different components of film - ‘camera eye, narrator, lights, use of space, the spoken dialogue, body language, facial expression as well as the silences’ (Jain and Rai 9). Despite the differences, both literature and films are likely to project stereotypes associated with women or any other gender for that matter. Nelmes notes, “The media... are manipulated by the ruling patriarchal ideology and what is seen as natural as clear cut and all wears is in fact a construct produced by society” (Nelmes 228). Intentionally or unintentionally mimic the existing social silhouette, power dynamics and prejudices. Therefore, film criticism and theories are fundamental in viewing films from different lenses and problematizing misrepresentation on screen.

The emergence of Feminist film theories can be attributed to the rise of the women's movement. The main aim of feminist film critics was to critique the stereotyped representation of the female onscreen and make space for the expansion of feminist films. The freedom to produce female oriented films was only made possible by the emergence of independent filmmaking. In the formative years, feminist film theory focused on the depiction of sexuality and representation, exploring how these themes interacted with the dominant male power structures

in a patriarchal society (Nelmes 228-229). Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and Claire Johnston's *Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema* established laid the foundation of feminist film theory making them the forebears of the said theory. Both illustrate the longstanding stereotypes surrounding women and their bodies in mainstream cinema and criticise the limited roles women have in films and their portrayal as mere extensions of male characters. Furthermore, Johnston advocated for cinema which defies these narrow conventions while still being entertaining for mainstream audiences (Nelmes 229). Consequently, women's cinema which was linked with avant-garde cinema saw its rise; it was often referred to as counter cinema as it countered the conventions of mainstream cinema.

Now that the significance of representation in cinema and the importance of film criticism are laid, it is necessary to situate this in the Indian context and understand Bollywood's manifestation of the same. Bollywood is not merely an imitation of Hollywood films, but much more than that. A typical Bollywood film is characterised by exaggerated storylines, melodramatic acting, extravagant settings and elaborate dance and song sequences. This stylised format, known as masala films, often delivers a memorable and flamboyant cinematic experience. It is a box-office oriented industry which prioritises entertainment over artistic creation. While films targeting mass audiences and pure entertainment may not overtly address societal issues they can inadvertently reveal unconscious biases against women and the barriers they face in their pursuit of personal freedom (Jain and Rai 9-10). In order to trace the evolution of women's representation in the Bollywood scene, it is necessary to understand the genre first and its various aspects which intertwine in projecting biases and stereotypes associated with women.



## **2.2 What is Bollywood?**

Lights, camera, action... and one enters the larger than life world of cinema and filmmaking. Bollywood is undoubtedly one of the biggest film industries around the globe. Indian cinema as a whole produces more than thousand films every year and Bollywood is one of its biggest contributors. The two terms, Indian cinema and Bollywood, are often used interchangeably by the west, however, they are not the same. Indian cinema is an umbrella term for all film industries prevailing in India and Bollywood is a part of it. Bollywood largely refers to commercial Hindi cinema produced in Mumbai; it is diverse, flamboyant and vibrant. The term is a blend of 'Hollywood' and 'Bombay' (under British rule).

The Bombay film industry is distinct from Hollywood in terms of aesthetics, storytelling styles, and cultural contexts, however, it's equally prolific and influential with the vast output of films that are widely circulated and consumed not only in India but also globally (Ganti 2). The term doesn't only refer to a particular film industry within India anymore, but also refers to a specific style of filmmaking and has developed into a genre of its own called Bollywood masala films. Bollywood films are renowned for their ability to seamlessly blend multiple genres and themes, creating a unique cinematic experience. This eclectic mix of genres was popularly referred to as the 'masala films' in the 1970s and 80s, much like the various spices used in a curry (Kabir 7). This resulted in the creation of a rich tapestry of storytelling that appeals to a wide range of Indian masses. However, the now celebrated film industry faced many challenges during its commencement and occupied low cultural status. This glamorous industry wasn't the same at its inception.

Hindi cinema has a longstanding history of being categorised as B-rated by Indian film critics due to the taboos associated with public performances, for being crude imitations of

Hollywood films, as well as its portrayal of sexuality through song and dance sequences (Dwyer and Pinto xvii)(Gehlawat xiv). This was also the reason for minimal presence of women in the film industry. Tejaswini Ganti writes the following while commenting on the same,

The reasons for the marginal presence of women have to do with the disreputable image of the Bombay film industry within Indian society and the nature of its work culture. The industry has long been viewed as an unsavory place for women due to its historical connections to courtesan culture, organized crime, and stereotypes about the “casting couch” (Ganti 94).

Bollywood still remains a primarily male-dominated film industry, however, in recent times women have occupied several roles in the industry as directors, script writers, choreographers, set and costume designers, actors and playback singers and the stigma associated with the film industry is long forgotten. The evolution of women in Bollywood and their representation on screen is discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter.

Despite its unfavourable position in society, Hindi cinema was consumed on a large scale by Indian masses, specially the middle and lower class sections. Discussions on the purpose of Bollywood films and the types of audiences it caters to are ongoing. These discussions are important to this study as they denote the filmmakers’ motivations behind creating a specific kind of film. Renowned filmmaker and critic, Satyajit Ray, for instance, categorised mainstream Hindi cinema as an ‘escapist fare for simple-minded audiences’ (Gehlawat xiv). In his anthology, *Our Films Their Films: Essays*, Ray argues that cinema is the only available form of inexpensive entertainment for Indian masses who crave for spectacles, romances, and songs and dances (Ray 72). Ray concludes that ‘if you think in terms of tired untutored minds with undeveloped taste needing an occasional escape through relaxation...the best prescription is a well mixed potpourri

of popular entertainment' (Ray 73). Hence, Bollywood's main purpose could be deduced as providing maximum entertainment and more importantly building a magical escape for its viewers from their not so magical life. Entertainment can manifest in different ways. It is important to note that escapism leads to cinematic voyeurism and scopophilia suggested by film theories. Escapism implies that the viewers instantaneously connect with the films and its characters while temporarily losing their sense of reality. This concept is fundamental in understanding women's portrayal on screen and how they are perceived by masses. Mulvey elaborated on this phenomenon where spectators perceive themselves as one with the characters which blurs their awareness of themselves as separate individuals, almost like a child unaware of who they are, where they are, what they are doing (Chaudhari 34). This process of infantilization leads to viewers perceiving themselves as the subject; for example, films which are geared towards male audiences project women as an object while leaving space for the spectator to identify with the male subject. This trend can be observed in Bollywood as well.

Aside from Bollywood films, parallel cinema and counter cinema were also produced in Hindi which deviated from the conventions and traditions of mainstream narratives. Bollywood has been through various phases since its emergence; from silent cinema to mass productions. The introduction of sound in the 1930s changed the landscape of Indian cinema. This led to inclusion of songs and dance numbers. These song and dance sequences are quintessential to Indian cinema which was inspired by Indian theatre, folk theatre, and western musicals. With the advancement in technology and capital investments Bollywood has evolved as an industry as well as a genre over the years; the period post independence is referred to as the Golden Age of Bollywood; despite struggling with social taboos and financial crisis this age is seen as 'time of creativity, originality, talent, quality, genius, sincerity, and professionalism' (Ganti 28). Critics

argue that Bollywood in the 2000s is maybe experiencing a new wave with a focus on upscale cinema experiences targeting elite sections of society as well (Dwyer and Pinto xvii). Certainly the involvement of women in the industry has increased as well as their representation on screen has evolved but differences still exist. Therefore, the next section provides an overview of women in Bollywood and their portrayal on screen throughout the various phases of Bollywood.

### **2.3 Women and Bollywood**

Though detailed records of early Hindi film industry are inaccessible, it is certain that women's involvement in it was minimal due its disreputable status. Since the inception of the film industry in the late 19th century it was common for women to hold positions in non technical fields like continuity and makeup or as a part of the production system, however, they were seldom seen as producers, directors, editors or writers (Nelmes 223). Nonetheless, in recent years Bollywood has witnessed a progressive change with numerous female filmmakers on board. Women's representation on screen has also transformed over the years; from damsel in distress to independent woman. Hence, for a better understanding of the same, an overview of evolution of women's representation in Bollywood has been curated below. Before diving into this it is important to note that Bollywood or Hindi cinema has always been a diverse industry producing varied stories at the same time, the following overview provides a report on common tropes followed by Bollywood in terms of female representation; exceptions in every age can be observed.

One of the early progenitors of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke, is regarded as the 'Father of Indian cinema' by the Indian state, the Bombay film industry and the popular press (Ganti 8). His first silent film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) accelerated the making of films based on mythical stories borrowed from Indian epics. The story centred around the trials and

tribulations faced by Harishchandra the king in his lifetime. The movie did feature a female character, the king's wife, Taramati. However, the character was played by a man, Anna Salunke. The absence of women in the industry was because acting was viewed as a demeaning and disgraceful profession, especially for women (Sud). As Ganti notes,

The public nature of the filmic image appeared to violate the dominant norms of feminine modesty. Within Hindu and Muslim communities, women bear the burden of representing the family or community's status and respectability which traditionally has been associated with limiting women's movement outside the home. Even prostitutes were unwilling to act in films since that would appear as a public disclosure of their occupation, so in Phalke's first film, *Raja Harishchandra*, the role of Queen Taramati was played by a young man (Ganti 12).

This was a common practice in Indian folk theatre tradition where young men played female characters; the same can be observed in theatre during the Shakespearean era. Slowly, however, in the 1920s educated Anglo-Indian women from Christian and Jewish backgrounds who were 'casteless' and did not find acceptance in Indian society entered the acting field. To appeal to the Indian audiences they even adopted pseudonyms which sounded more Indian Sita Devi (Renee Smith), Sulochana (Ruby Meyers), Indira Devi (Effie Hippolet), Lalita Devi (Bonnie Bird), Madhuri (Beryl Claessen), Manorama (Winnie Stewart), and Sabita Devi (Iris Gasper) (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 162).

During this era more films based on Indian mythology began flourishing in the Indian film industry which made the cinematic experience familiar to Indian audiences. As a result female characters portrayed on screen were depictions of female characters from Indian epics. Therefore, it can be inferred that female characters were inspired by feminine archetypes laid



down in these epics. Gradually, Television adopted this genre in the 1980s and films explored other categories.

Another landmark in Indian film history was the introduction of sound with the film *Alam Ara* in 1931 which began the Age of Sound. The film was a period fantasy adaptation of a popular Parsi theatre production featuring one of India's leading stars Zubeida as the titular character. This movie established songs and dance sequences as staples in Indian cinema; it was advertised as the 'all-taking, all-singing, all-dancing film' (Ganti 11). Ganti argues that much of song and dance influences in the film industry were derived from courtesan culture which was rooted in traditional art and performances. This also meant that henceforth filmmakers required actors who could sing and speak the Bombay Hindi dialect, therefore, many Anglo-Indian actresses were forced to leave the industry owing to language differences. However, in the 1930s, the participation of women belonging to higher classes in Hindi cinema such as Durga Khote and Devika Rani transformed the image of screen actresses and inspired many families to let their daughters pursue acting (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 162).

The phase that followed is dubbed as the 'Golden Age' of Hindi cinema (1950s -1960s) as creativity and originality flourished in its cinematic history. Films of this age were utilised as a medium to discuss social issues and evils such as poverty, nation-rebuilding and inequalities in society and moved away from genres like mythological adaptations and period fantasies. In terms of women's representation, this phase is considered to be rather progressive and reformist in nature attributing to the hopeful and positive mindset of people post independence (Gulati). Salva Mubarak in her *Vogue* article titled 'How leading roles for women in Bollywood have evolved over the years' denotes that during the period, Indian cinema often portrays society in an aspirational light rather than realistically, with many successful films focusing on themes of

overcoming class and gender inequalities. Unlike the subsequent decades women had significant roles in shaping the narratives of these films (Mubarak). Women's presence in film narratives during this age was as prominent, if not more, as their male counterparts, however, most stories were still told from a patriarchal perspective. The best example of this would be the film *Mother India* (1957) by Mehboob Khan which is regarded by critics and researchers as one of the first female centric films depicting a strong willed woman as a metaphor for India after independence. The movie was response to Katherine Mayo's book of the same name which offered criticism of Indian, specially the society's treatment of women, hence, Khan wished to present quintessential Indian women in a positive light which at that point meant being a self sacrificing woman/mother with high moral dignity and individualism (Banarjee). Nationalistic themes were explored through the protagonist Radha the virtuous and strong willed 'mother figure'. Despite the debates on whether the film empowers women or it subscribes to female archetypes of the time, the fact that this film was a major step forward in women's representation on screen is undeniable.

The 1960s marked the emergence of alternative cinema where women were placed at the centre of film narratives, defying traditional stereotypes of Indian women, and depicting them as strong and independent individuals with unique identities. Women often played dominant characters. While discussing the increase in female centric films during the 1960s and its implications Andal N notes that,

Definition of femininity so produced and portrayed in fact highlights the tension between 'modernity' and 'tradition.' Women are often used in new wave films as symbols of resistance and victims of exploitation the emphasis is on the 'myth' in popular films with 'reality' (N. 255).

A revolutionary film of this age was *Guide* (1965) written and directed by Vijay Anand starring Wahida Rehman as the female lead Rosie. Her courageous acts of rejecting toxic relationships, prioritising her own happiness and pursuing her individual dreams in a conservative Indian society defined her as a modern Indian woman and distinguished her from others (Gulati). When it comes to women's body image on screen Mubarak notes that 'the depiction of the female form was, more often than not, purely for the narrative, and never gratuitous' while giving the example of a song sequence from the movie *Sangam* (1964) where the scene shifts between the heroine in a bikini and the hero; nowhere does the camera film the heroine's body in slow motion which is very common in present day cinema, rather the frame focuses on the singing hero (Mubarak). Despite the progressive Golden age women's roles in films took a step back in the succeeding years.

The mainstream films of 1970s and 1980s restricted women's roles to either being dutiful wives or forgiving and selfless mothers who often incurred abuse and suffered in silence, but were rescued at the end through male intervention; *Seeta aur Geeta* (1972) and *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975) exemplify these ideals (Mubarak). These movies were criticised for setting absurd standards for women and their patience as the films projected the one who was naive, docile and quiet as the 'ideal' or 'good' female. The ones which did not fit these criteria were categorised as self centred characters. Even their freedom at the end was in the hands of the male characters; the heroes. An important historical episode that bore an impact on the film industry was the declaration of emergency by the then prime minister Sonia Gandhi. Insecurity, uncertainty and chaos characterised this period which was reflected in the films as well.

One of the most significant changes in Hindi cinema emerged in this turbulent era. In 1973, the tremendous success of *Zanjeer* (Chain), a film about a police

officer (played by Amitabh Bachchan) who works outside the bounds of the law, introduced the figure of the “angry young man,” which completely changed the persona of the hero in Hindi cinema (Ganti 32).

The advent of the “angry young man” trope films became projected more violence wherein the hero was presented as a larger than life character who could eliminate crime, poverty and atrocities faced by innocent people. Women’s characters were overshadowed by the strong male presence; either they played the characters of love interests or victims of rape and violence. An example of this is the cult classic *Sholay* (1975) and *Himmatwala* (1983). Though these films had two of the most iconic and strong female characters Basanti and Rekha, respectively, their presence in the narrative was limited to being lovers of the mighty heroes. This trend was carried on in the 90s as well. Nonetheless, parallel cinema was indeed thriving in the 80s with films such *Mirch Masala* (1989) which highlighted the ideals of sisterhood as well as the plight of women in rural India. There were some mainstream Hindi films as well which defied the usual tropes such as *Sadma* (1983) and *Chandni* (1989) and established Sridevi as one of the early female superstars; a title that was usually reserved for male actors. Over the course of her career she has worked in many female centric and female led films.

Moving onto the 90s, this was the time when the term ‘Bollywood’ became extremely popular and commonly used to refer to Hindi cinema. Ravi Vasudevan in his essay ‘The Meanings of Bollywood’ writes,

Nowadays, this term [Bollywood] is used as if it had always existed. It is used profusely in trade magazines, television shows, and popular periodicals, and it is used retrospectively. While looking at trade papers of the 1990s, I only started

noticing its regular usage in the latter part of the decade. Clearly, it may have been used at various times, but not so systematically as now (Dwyer and Pinto 7).

Vasudevan elaborates that it was the success of diaspora-themed films such as the evergreen *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) which popularised the term globally. Furthermore, this can be viewed as a result of globalisation and liberalisation in the 90s. Did this change the depiction of women in cinema? Yes, there was a significant change in the types of characters written for women. This was also the time when the western as well as Indian feminist waves were making their presence felt in India. Educated women began prioritising themselves and their ambitions over expectations of society with regard to marriage and having children. Women in films were now shown as working women, however, ultimately their fate relied on men. Though women were presented as ambitious, they would often, if not always require a man to be successful and content. This is exemplified by Roma's character in the film *Mohra* (1994) who despite being a young educated and accomplished woman regresses to a damsel in distress waiting for the hero (Mubarak). Objectification of women's bodies on screen was also rampant; Raveena Tandon who played Roma's character was overly sexualised in the song 'Tip Tip Barsa Paani', ironically, more than her character in the film, her dance sequence in the rain became more popular.

Additionally, Malati Mathur in her essay 'Courting: Hindi Film Ishtyle' discusses Bollywood's projection of problematic behaviour of the hero towards the heroine masked as courtship; a trope popular in the 90s and continues to be commonly used today. As she says,

Courtship in Hindi films is invariably crude and insensitive, the hero frequently taking recourse to behaviour which our lawmakers have termed 'eve teasing', in his nightmarish fervour to win over the girl of his dreams...The marvel of this is

that the heroine finally succumbs to the heroes dubious charms and is won over with his caveman-like antics (Jain and Rai 59).

Harassing women is often portrayed in Hindi films for laughs and giggles and to make things worse it is treated as flirting and wooing. This can be seen in the film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) during the first encounter of the two leads. The dialogues were layered with misogynistic remarks. Several other films of the 90s as well as early 2000s such as *Haseena Maan Jayegi* (1999) and *Jodi No. 1* (2001) follow the same trend; men harassing, manhandling, pestering, and forcing women into falling in love with them. Unfortunately, these films normalise mistreatment of women which viewers take back with them and practice in the real world. Despite the problematic female representation in mainstream cinema, female directors such as Deepa Mehta rebelled against the restrictions of normative structures and portrayed female bonding in films like *Fire* (1996). Portraying lesbian relationships was considered to be scandalous and controversial at the time. However, because of filmmakers like her realistic representations of women, their suffering, and feelings could be screened in cinema halls. Only in the late 20th century women have entered the field of commercial cinema and new wave cinema as directors and writers and have created space for feminist perspectives and women oriented films discussing women's issues (Jain and Rai 256).

Lastly, the 21st century Bollywood offers a diverse variety of female characters unlike some of the last few decades, however, female stereotypes and objectification of women still take place on screen. There is no denying that in the 21st century problematic portrayals of women do exist, specially the early 2000s with movies like *No Entry* (2005) normalising infidelity toward forgiving wives and treating it as a comedy production for mass entertainment. However, this age has also witnessed a surge of female directors, producers and writers in

Bollywood which definitely adds a new perspective in the writing and projection of female characters. Moreover, the viewers' mindset and expectations have also changed demanding higher quality storytelling which resonates with everybody. Movies like Piku (2015), Queen (2013), Kahaani (2012), Margarita with a Straw (2014), Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016), Gangubai (2022) are examples of changing female portrayal on screen owing to the contribution of progressive directors and writers; both male and female. Therefore, the next chapter focuses on appreciating the portrayal of realistic female characters while criticising the stereotyped presentation written and directed by both male and female directors and producers in the 21st century. Even in the 21st century in this commercial business the problems of pay disparity, and financial differences in female vs male produced films remain unresolved, nonetheless it is a big step moving forward.



**CHAPTER III**  
**WOMEN PORTRAYED BY MEN AND WOMEN IN BOLLYWOOD: AN**  
**EXPLORATION**

*Men act, women appear. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at.*

~John Berger

In the domain of visual arts, whether it be paintings or films, women have often been presented as objects of vision. The way one perceives art is heavily dependent on their social, cultural, and historical background as well as their understanding of their surroundings. These concepts are elaborated on by John Berger in his book titled *Ways of Seeing* (1972) where he explores how art and images are perceived and interpreted as he notes that ‘seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak’ (Berger 7). Berger highlights the power dynamics inherent in the act of looking as he criticises the objectified representations of women in visual culture. Women are expected to act and look a certain way to please the viewer (usually a male spectator) which reduces them to a mere commodity or a sight meant to be enjoyed by the other. These ideas can be found in Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* where she examines the relationship between the presentation of women on screen through the camera lens and how that influences the perception of the male spectators. Similarly, the Bechdel test devised by Alison Bechdel focuses on the presence of female characters on screen and their interactions with one another. This analysis-based chapter is dedicated to examining the portrayal of women in twenty-first-century Bollywood using the aforementioned concepts. A sample of ten Bollywood films is chosen which includes a combination of films directed by male and female directors. The sample includes the following films;

- *Fashion* directed by Madhur Bhandarkar

- *English Vinglish* directed by Gauri Shinde
- *Queen* directed by Vikas Bahl
- *Dil Dhadakne Do* directed by Zoya Akhtar
- *Veere Di Wedding* directed by Shashanka Ghosh
- *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar
- *Kabir Singh* directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga
- *Bulbbul* directed by Anvita Dutt Guptan
- *Mimi* directed by Laxman Utekar
- *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* directed by Karan Johar

### **3.1 Understanding the Theories and Concepts**

Before moving on to the analysis of the films it is important to understand the theoretical framework used in this study, hence, an overview of the two main theories and their key concepts is provided. Laura Mulvey in her critical essay argues that the portrayal of women in films is a reflection of the phallocentric order of patriarchal society. She appropriates the psychoanalytic theory to unveil the unconscious patriarchal ideologies presented in cinema. While discussing phallocentrism and its implications Mulvey notes that,

The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as lynch pin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies (Mulvey 6).

Having a phallus makes the male counterpart automatically gain a higher authority over the female; the phallocentric structure assumes the authority of the phallus (masculine) in

understanding and building social relations. Hence, men are placed at the centre of this structure while women are situated at the margins which exemplifies the power dynamics in a society. Women are usually seen as the other as iterated by Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex*. By the virtue of being born as a woman, they become an object of desire. Films, specifically, treat ‘woman as an image, man as bearer of the look’(Mulvey 11). Mulvey places **scopophilia** at the centre of her study; scopophilia refers to receiving sexual pleasure by looking at a specific object or person and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze (Mulvey 8). Mulvey suggests that camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism), all tend to blur the limits of screen space (Mulvey 13). At the same time, the darkened theatre halls create the illusion for each viewer of being an exclusive observer, peeping (like Peeping Tom) into others’ private worlds detached from the rest of the audience. Furthermore, she explains that cinema develops scopophilia ‘in a narcissistic way’ wherein the viewer identifies with the male character on screen. Mulvey explains this phenomenon by referencing Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage which proposes ‘that human identity or the ego is formed when an infant first encounters itself as a separate entity through its reflection in a mirror’ (Chaudhari 34). Similarly, a spectator identifies himself with the ideal image of a male hero on screen and through this identification the hero becomes a medium for the spectator to attain authority over the female figure on the big screen. Therefore, Mulvey notes that,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their

appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey 11).

In this act of looking, the object of the look is supposed to be unaware of the gaze. The very fact that the woman does not know that she's being looked at makes her an object. The camera in these scenes follows the eyes of the male figure. Through the camera lens, the audience gets a view of the male character's gaze.

However, a problem in this process of seeking visual pleasure arises due to another psychological phenomenon experienced by men called castration anxiety first proposed by Sigmund Freud. Essentially, it refers to the fear of losing one's penis experienced by infantile males when they learn about the differences between male and female bodies as they tend to assume that the female's penis was removed at some point. Castration anxiety is related to the child's original trauma of the discovery that his mother does not have a penis; consequently, according to Freudian theory, the child assumes that she is castrated (Chaudhari 36). Mulvey suggests that the presence of women and their lack of penis implies a threat of castration and hence, unpleasantness (Mulvey 13). Cinema deals with castration anxiety in two ways; **sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia**. The former involves re-enacting the original trauma, investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery and revealing her guilt (associated with castration) followed by either punishing or saving her, hence, the pleasure is aroused by asserting control over the female, subjecting her to either punishment or forgiveness (Mulvey 13). The latter, however, involves overvaluation of the female i.e. complete rejection of castration by turning the object of threat into a fetish. This technique involves close-up shots of the female body which makes women appear more reassuring than dangerous (Mulvey 14). According to Mulvey, sadistic side fits well with the narrative as,

Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end. Fetishistic scopophilia, on the other hand, can exist outside linear time as the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone (Mulvey 14).

Mulvey has provided a detailed breakdown of how women are perceived in film narratives to reveal the unconscious reflections of patriarchal society in visual narratives and make women aware of the gaze. These concepts will be extensively used in this study in the context of Hindi Cinema. This will be followed by the examination of films using the Bechdel test. The Bechdel test as mentioned in Chapter I involves measuring whether the films fulfil the following three requirements;

- The movie must have at least two named female characters.
- The women must interact with each other.
- They should talk about something other than men (love interest)

If the films meet these requirements they are categorised as feminist-friendly films. This is a simple yet effective method of evaluating the presence of female characters in films and their relevance to the narrative. Along with the analysis of women's representation on screen using these theories, the following sections will also be accompanied by textual analysis of the screenplay and women's concerns and experiences portrayed through the female characters written by Bollywood.

### **3.2 Through the Look of the Camera**

The films chosen include four films directed by women and six directed by men. All films include important women characters, however, their presentation differs as it heavily

depends on the directors' vision; the one who envisions the written script. More often than not the directors are part of script-writing as well, thereby, allowing them to be more involved in the process of bringing the characters to life. A director's importance in the filmmaking process is undeniable as it is through their eyes that the audience views the storyline. Aside from an independent analysis of every film, this section involves a comparative study of women characters portrayed by men and women to test the hypothesis. The following analysis heavily relies on concepts derived from Mulvey's critical essay. Rather than following the chronological order, the analysis follows the sequence of films with the most depiction of voyeurism to the least. Additionally, the English translations of Hindi dialogues are borrowed from the official translations provided by respective streaming platforms.

A perfect manifestation of the male gaze in recent cinema can be found in the film *Kabir Singh* (2019) directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga. As the title suggests the film is entirely told from the perspective of its male protagonist. Although Mulvey's theory was initially meant to criticise the Hollywood films of the 70s, it seems perfectly relevant to critique the portrayal of Preeti; the female protagonist (Kiara Advani). The movie is a Hindi remake of the Telugu commercial hit *Arjun Reddy* (2017). The film establishes voyeurism within its structure from the very beginning as the storyline shifts between the present time and flashbacks of the past. Kabir Singh (Shahid Kapoor) exemplifies the male ego; the concept connotes a judgmental type of superiority with a need to show off, constantly striving to impress (women) and outdo others, especially, other men (Boland). Male ego is a product of toxic masculinity which refers to a set of social guidelines associated with stereotyped projection of 'manliness'. At its exposition, the viewer is introduced to the main character as a medical student with uncontrollable anger management issues which further hinders his relationship with his love interest: Preeti. The very

first glimpse of the voyeuristic gaze appears during the introductory scene of the female protagonist; a naive and timid Preeti. (Fig. 3.1, 3.2).



Fig. 3.1 Kabir noticing Preeti

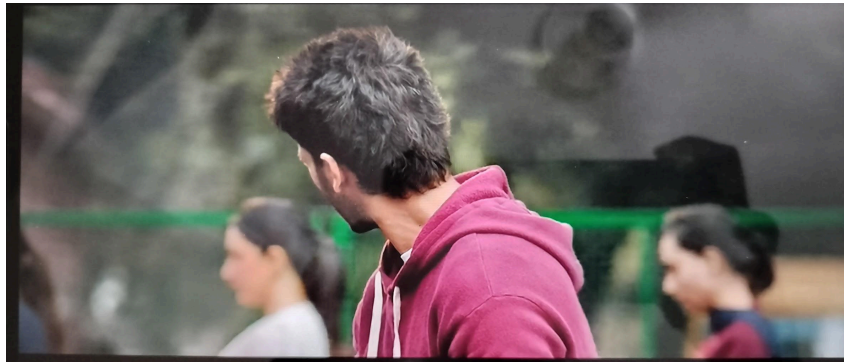


Fig. 3.2 Kabir staring at Preeti

Preeti catches the attention of Kabir amid other girls, the camera follows Kabir's eyes and the viewer gets to look at Preeti from his perspective. The camera panning towards Preeti tells the audience to follow Kabir's gaze. All this while, Preeti is unaware of being looked at, making her the object of the look. Aside from the camera movements, the costume also plays an important role in identifying the object to be looked at. While the other girls can be seen wearing dull and muted coloured clothes, the bright white attire makes Preeti stand out among the others (Fig. 3.3). Likewise, the following series of two frames (Fig 3.4, 3.5) visualise the male gaze.





Fig. 3.3 Preeti's complete white attire makes her stand out



Fig. 3.4 and 3.5 Kabir's moving gaze

This scene establishes that Kabir has fallen in love with Preeti at first sight, however, the way he approaches the female lead comes across as extremely problematic. In the very next scene, Kabir asserts control over Preeti as he addresses a class of male students and warns them to stay away from 'his girl.'

Kabir: There is a new girl in college. She's mine. If anyone tries to impress her, I will not spare that person...The girl dressed in white (*Kabir Singh* 0:25:35)

Notice how he speaks about Preeti as he owns her; this symbolises his obsession with the object and his possessiveness towards it. Despite his problematic approach, he is able to woo Preeti who goes along with all of his tactics without questioning or retaliating which was pointed out by many film critics like Kiran Rao. Reddy Vanga while responding to Rao regarding the criticism he faced for misogyny in his films stated the following in a conversation with Dainik Bhaskar as reported by the Times of India.

Some people don't understand what they are saying. One assistant director showed me an article from this superstar's second ex-wife where she was saying that Baahubali and Kabir Singh promote misogyny and stalking. I think she doesn't understand the difference between stalking and approaching (Etimes In).

Contrary to his statement, the wooing approach adopted by Kabir from general understanding was in fact stalking. Additionally, the above statement is problematic in the way Reddy Vanga addresses his fellow critics and it goes on to show how and where the visionary, the director himself places women in society. His film is exactly a representation of the same. Coming back to Kabir and Preeti, their relationship turns abusive when Preeti's parents disagree with Kabir's marriage proposal. Hence, voyeurism turns to sadistic voyeurism. The scene outside Preeti's house is a prime example of punishing women for disagreeing with men. Kabir's anger issues flare up as Preeti tries to calm him down; Kabir threatens to leave her and she can be seen begging him to not leave her alone (Fig. 3.6)



Fig. 3.6 Display of sadistic voyeurism

During this Kabir says the following dialogues which reveal how he perceived her.

Kabir: Who are you? You have no identity except for being Kabir Rajdheer Singh's girl. That's it.

Preeti: That's true. I have no identity of my own. (*Kabir Singh* 1:23:40)

He slaps her while demeaning her. This scene reflects how women are perceived in a patriarchal society. They are merely an extension of the male. They have no identity of their own. The idea is so ingrained in people's mentality that women themselves begin associating the meaning of their existence with serving men. Kabir and Preeti's love story is the epitome of a problematic and toxic relationship from the get-go. Although both were responsible for their separation, the way the story unfolds, it presents Kabir as the victim who suffers after his beloved marries someone else. His friend, post Kabir's break-up, keeps blaming Preeti and preaches about all women being the same. Truly, a perplexing character who is ready to let Kabir marry his sister to settle his life, despite knowing the circumstances. Brotherhood and friendship are hailed while tossing women around as mere sexual objects.

Preeti bears the punishment by marrying someone else while Kabir goes feral in the process of moving on. However, as the movie nears its end, the two lovers reunite and Preeti explains that she left her husband soon after they got married and she got pregnant with Kabir's child. Preeti's side of the story is only revealed at the end; one realises how brave and strong Preeti was when she reveals the hardships she faced as a pregnant unmarried single woman. The park scene symbolises Kabir saving his lover from this ordeal (a key feature of sadistic voyeurism) and both forgiving each other; all mistakes are forgiven and they get back together. It is important to note that Preeti chooses to forgive and get back with Kabir; the relationship is not forced. Many may disagree with her choices but this does not make a weak character or woman in any way. One must realise her circumstances and problematise Kabir's behaviour rather than pointing fingers at her. The film ends with a typical happy ending, however, its misogynistic treatment of women as mere objects of obsession and pleasure remains controversial.

The theme of men falling in love at first sight is common in other Bollywood films as well; it can be observed in the films *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019). Both were directed by female directors, Zoya Akhtar and Shelly Chopra Dhar, respectively. There is a stark difference between how women characters are presented in these two films as opposed to *Kabir Singh*. The male gaze is not dominant in these films as they focus on the emancipation of women. However, hints of male gaze can be observed in certain scenes. A glimpse of the male gaze can be found in the scene in *Dil Dhadakne Do* where Kabir (Ranveer Singh) sees Farah Ali (Anushka Sharma) swimming (Fig. 3.7, 3.8).



Fig. 3.7 Kabir noticing Farah

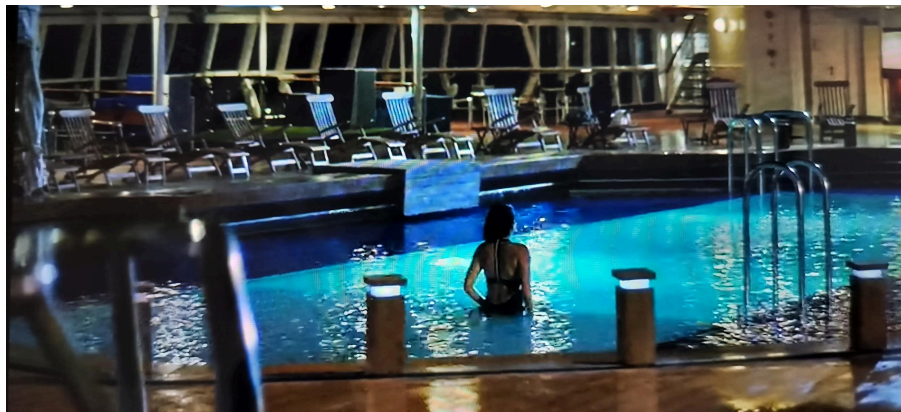


Fig. 3.8 Kabir's view of Farah



The absence of others and the isolation of the two characters amplify the gaze. However, soon the camera focuses on Farah and shows the hesitation she experiences in the close-up frames (Fig. 3.9).



Fig. 3.9 Close-up showing Farah noticing the presence of Kabir

The scene is coupled with a bit of commentary by the narrator, the family dog, who says that at that very instance the two, Kabir and Farah, fall in love with each other. On the contrary, the close-up frames tell a different story. In the absence of this narration, solely based on the scene, one could assume that Farah was rather uncomfortable in that situation. It is important to note that the film does not have a perpetual male gaze. Although Farah's introduction begins through Kabir's gaze, she is not presented as an object throughout the film. She is a strong and independent female character who chooses whether to accept or reject Kabir's advances.

One of the major themes of the movie is to expose the superficiality of wealthy families belonging to high society. In this process, Akhtar portrays complex women characters whose freedom is curtailed by the limitations of societal expectations and criticises the same. It discusses multiple concerns of women associated with marriage and power dynamics in relationships, especially, in a traditional Indian society. The fear of being left alone by one's husband or partner reappears in this movie through the character of Mrs. Neelam Mehra (Shefali Shah); the wife of Mr. Kamal Mehra. They live a pretentious life while maintaining a facade of

perfect marriage. Neelam is completely dependent on her husband and suffers silently while her husband has affairs with other women. Neelam's thoughts on marriage and divorce appear regressive and outdated as she tries to school her daughter, Ayesha (Priyanka Chopra), on how to go about one's married life. When confronted by her kids about her broken marriage, it is revealed that she couldn't let go of her husband as she had nowhere else to go. Likewise, her daughter Ayesha struggles with her marital life. Despite being a successful businesswoman, she is looked down upon by her husband and her mother-in-law throughout the film. One may assume that wealthy educated families would have a rather progressive outlook towards women's issues, however, the film tarnishes this image. The hesitation she incurs while telling her about her decision to get a divorce from her parents speaks volumes about how the conditioning of women begins at home; women are conditioned to believe that the only way they can bring honour to their family is by maintaining a happy marriage, pleasing their husbands and having kids. Questions like, "What will society say? Do you wish to dishonour your family?" are directed to women when they choose to prioritise their happiness and dreams over a strained marriage. A revelatory scene in the film is where Ayesha's childhood friend Sunny confronts her husband when he proudly mentions that 'he was the first male in his family to allow his wife to work outside. Sunny counters him by saying, "Allowing someone means that you are in a position of authority and that is not equality." These subtle remarks highlight casual sexism, thereby, showing how women are treated in a patriarchal structure and they have to continue performing their 'gender' to be accepted by society; either as an ideal wife or mother. The film ends with the emancipation of these characters.

Similarly, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisha Laga* deals with the perception of lesbianism in Indian society. This is one of the few mainstream Bollywood films that have depicted same-sex

relationships. In a conversation with Lavina Melvani in an interview “Lassi With Lavina” Shelly Chopra Dhar talks about her experience as a debutant film director and talks about why she specifically chose to work with this theme.

I’ve felt for a long time that representation for this community has not been done at all in the mainstream in the way it should be done. In the mainstream platform in India gay issues were either shown in a derogatory fashion or in a comic relief way in the portrayal of the characters. In parallel cinema you had films like ‘Fire’ and now ‘Aligarh’ but those were films with a serious take and very limited audience in a different style of cinema. So I felt it was important to have this subject be the first on the mainstream platform – it was intentionally, consciously written. (Melvani).

It is refreshing to have a film like this which deals with a serious subject matter and conveys an impactful message while indulging in features of mainstream Bollywood Films; music, dance and drama. The first half of the film is told from Sahil Mirza’s ( Rajkummar Rao) perspective who, again, falls in love with Sweety (Sonam Kapoor) at first sight. The running away sequence where she drags him along with her displays him looking at her (Fig 3.10).



Fig. 3.10 Sahil staring at Sweety

The slowed-down close-up shots imply that he has already fallen in love with her. However, unlike Kabir Singh, Sahil does not force himself onto Sweety and the gaze itself does not come across as controlling or threatening; it is rather full of admiration paired with curiosity. Thereafter, he goes in search of her and finds out that she is a lesbian. This is where the focus of the story shifts from Sahil's pursuit of love to Sweety's repressed sexual identity. It can be inferred that Shelly Chopra Dhar utilised the common Bollywood trope of a boy falling in love with a girl to lead to something unexpected by most, a surprise or a twist, as mainstream Hindi cinema is overwhelmingly heteronormative. In a way, here she breaks away from the normative pattern of Hindi films. The scenes where Sweety reveals her childhood memories of feeling different from others and being fearful of school bullying make one realise the dilemma queer community experiences due to the stigma associated with homosexuality. The film portrays a realistic picture of queer women's struggles within a conservative Indian society. Sahil then actively helps Sweety unite with her love interest, Kuhu, and come out to her family. The technique of play within a narrative is used to express Sweety's suffering of being caged within the shackles of regressive society which involves her homophobic brother Bablu as well. Although the story is largely told from Sahil's perspective, it is refreshing to see Sweety stand up for herself at the end when her brother outs her sexuality in front of everybody. Sweety's father soon realises his daughter's pain and suffering. The dialogue "I am as different from you as you are from me and that places us at the same starting point" highlight the core theme of the film; acceptance of all. Hence, the movie concludes with Sweety's liberation from a repressed life.

Likewise, the films *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2013), and *Mimi* (2021) deal with women pursuing their dreams and prioritising their own happiness. All three films present strong women characters in different ways. Despite being female-centric films, these were huge



commercial hits at the box office, hence proving that commercial cinema can tell female-centric stories. The films *Queen* and *Mimi* are directed by men while *English Vinglish* was written and directed by a woman. The way the three stories are presented differ, however, the essence remains the same; women being the subjects and the agents of their lives. *Queen* directed by Vikas Bahl places the innocent and naive character of Rani (Kangana Ranaut) at the centre and follows her growth. Rani, left by her fiancé, makes a brave decision to go to Paris (her honeymoon destination) on her own. Being left on her own gives Rani the needed space to grow as an independent individual. Her experiences and encounters with other characters make her realise her own worth; the story is layered with humour. The flashbacks of her relationship with her ex-fiance show how controlling he was; whether it be dancing at functions or learning how to drive he doesn't hesitate to criticise her. Vijay (Rajkummar Rao) subjects Rani to a controlling male gaze (Fig. 3.11).

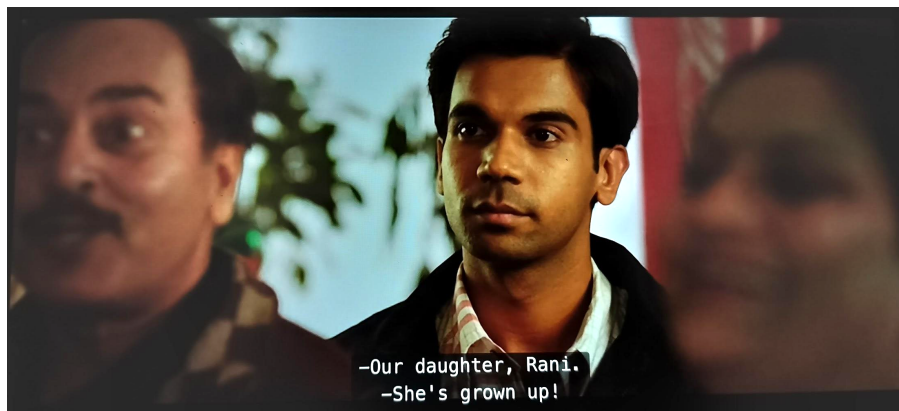


Fig. 3.11 Vijay gazing at Rani

Even when they reunite and he is supposed to be apologetic about his actions, he acts as though she completely belongs to her, demanding she stops seeing her male friends and acts 'modestly'. At the climax of the film, Rani rejects this male authority in her life and chooses to live on her own terms. This film is a great example to show that men are capable of writing and directing

realistic female characters as long as they are informed about the shortcomings of a patriarchal society and they understand women's suffering. In one of the "The Indian Express" articles, Vikas Bahl, while talking about the film, remarked on how lives for women in India are planned out for them by their parents and in that process they end up losing their own perspective on life (Sahgal). Furthermore, in an interview with MumbaiMirror, he elaborated on the same and revealed his intentions behind making this film,

In India, everybody's life is planned and they are seemingly happy living it, particularly girls. Once they are 20, families are in a hurry to get the girl settled. Only for a fortunate few the plan is disrupted... In Rani's case, because her plans went haywire, she discovered another side to herself... In the first half, Rani gets over the guy, and in the second, she gets over herself. Her naive notions are shattered, one by one, and in the end when she hugs her ex-fiance who'd dumped her on the eve of a marriage, there is no hatred, only gratitude! (Pathak)

Bahl's awareness regarding women's positioning in society, certainly, influenced his portrayal of Rani and the journey of her self-discovery. Although the film for the most part rejects the male gaze, instances of voyeurism appear in the following scenes. Firstly, when Vijalaxmi (Lisa Haydon) appears on the video call alongside Rani; the male gaze dominates this scene as the focus is laid on her chest while the men stare at her blatantly, one of them being a kid (Fig. 3.12, 3.13).



Fig. 3.12 Vijaylaxmi's exposed chest

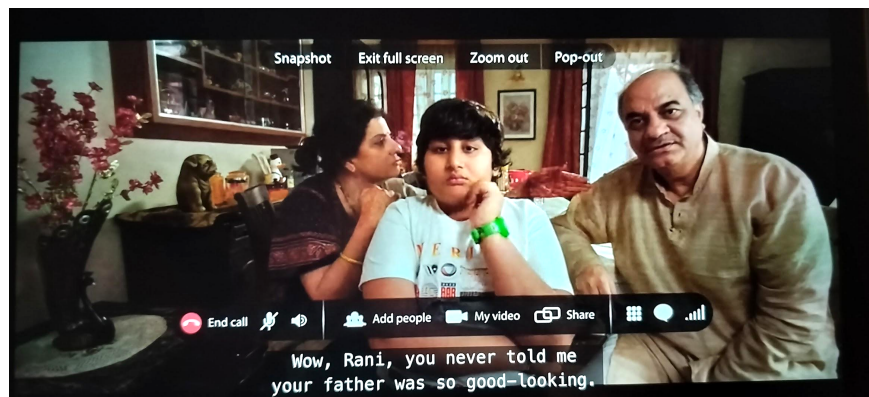


Fig. 3.13 Rani's father and brother glaring at Vijalaxmi's chest

Secondly, the scene where Rani visits a strip club (Fig. 3.14).



Fig. 3.14 Rani and her friends at the strip club

However, in the latter case it is important to note that the women behind the glass are actively engaging with the gaze, they are not passive. They are aware of them being looked at and objectified by others which they use to their advantage.

The film *English Vinglish*, on the other hand, directed by Gauri Shinde highlights how women are taken for granted by their families. Shinde highlights that aside from being treated as an object, women's contribution to the household is often overlooked in a family setting. Despite being a nurturing mother and a devoted wife, Shashi (Sridevi) is often disrespected by her family for not being fluent in English. Though she does not express her discomfort verbally, the close-ups of her face reveal her true feelings (Fig 3.15).



Fig 3.15 Close-up of Shashi

Throughout the film, she is made fun of and mocked for her inability to speak in English which she overcomes at the end, thus, making her emancipatory journey inspiring. Despite the absence of the male gaze, the film is a pleasurable watch rejecting Mulvey's argument that only the rejection of pleasure or displeasure can make good films with good female characters. However, making a mainstream film like this while defying the norms of Bollywood cinema is not easy. While talking about the hardships of making her directorial debut venture, Shinde, who is also the co-producer of the film revealed to The Hindustan Times that,

My decision to make my film with a female lead was met with a lot of resistance, no doubt, It was the toughest thing to get this film made. It was about a middle-aged woman wearing a saree. These were odds nobody would want to dive into. There was no violence, no sex, nothing that would set the ball rolling easily for someone. We went through hell. (Suri)

As can be seen, women making women-centric films is not always easy, however, it's the determination to make something different that counts. Moreover, in the same article, she mentions how the potential producers of the film, despite knowing the subject matter of the film, made wild demands like including an item song to increase the marketability of the film.

They wanted a superstar as her husband, then said we should not shoot in New York. They wanted me to compromise, and then they wanted Sridevi to dance because she is Sridevi. They thought she should do an item song. I said I would rather put the film aside and not make it. Then Balki (R Balki, filmmaker-husband) decided to produce it ourselves, and that's how our production house was formed. (Suri)

Making a film that is devoid of the male gaze is not the most suitable project for many production houses to undertake. However, with films like *Queen* and *English Vinglish* the landscape of Hindi cinema has largely changed.

The same can be observed in *Mimi* as well directed by Laxman Utekar. Mimi (Kriti Sanon) is a dancer who aspires to be a Bollywood heroine. Her introduction begins with a dance number, a key feature of Bollywood films as previously pointed out by Shinde as well, (popularly known as an item number which will be further explored in Chapter IV) where she dances in front of a crowd full of men (Fig. 3.16, 3.17).





Fig. 3.16 Mimi dancing in the middle of a group of men



3.17 Mimi dancing while being stared at by others

She becomes the object of sight of various people including the couple who wants to recruit her as a surrogate. Thus the object soon turns into the subject of the film. Although many Hindi films add item songs unnecessarily, purely to attract the male gaze, in this case, the introductory scene seems fitting and appropriate as it establishes Mimi as a dancer rather than an item. Mimi, who needs money, agrees to be a surrogate but is abandoned by the couple later in the film. Interestingly, the story does not include a love angle which is very atypical of Bollywood, it solely focuses on Mimi's life and her hardships; the main subject of the film. Despite feeling helpless, Mimi gives birth to the child and raises him going against the notions of conservative Indian society, unfortunately, she has to let go of her dreams of becoming an actor. Now, criticising her for choosing motherhood over her dreams would be unfair as it was her choice. The latest wave of feminism lays importance on the right to choose how one wants to lead their

life. Hence, Mimi's choice must be respected. On the other hand, it would have been interesting to see if the audience's reaction would have been as positive if Mimi had chosen to abort the child. Indian society places motherhood or a motherly figure on a pedestal, hence, it would have been interesting to know the audience's stance on abortion if Mimi had chosen her dreams over motherhood. Nonetheless, It is Mimi's life, so she chooses what she wants. Overall, the film presents an inspiring story of a woman who goes against all odds of society to protect her child. As can be observed so far men and women have both depicted great independent female characters who disavow the stereotypes associated with them.

Moving onto the 2008 film *Fashion* directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, as the title suggests the movie revolves around Meghna's (Priyanka Chopra) dream to be a supermodel in the fashion industry. Bhandarkar is known for dabbling in projects which rely heavily on realism; with *Fashion* he attempted to mirror the atrocities of the fashion world, Now, the fashion industry is inherently voyeuristic where models are supposed to be looked at. The industry largely emphasises women having to look a certain way which is reflected in the film as well (Fig. 3.18, 3.19, 3.20).

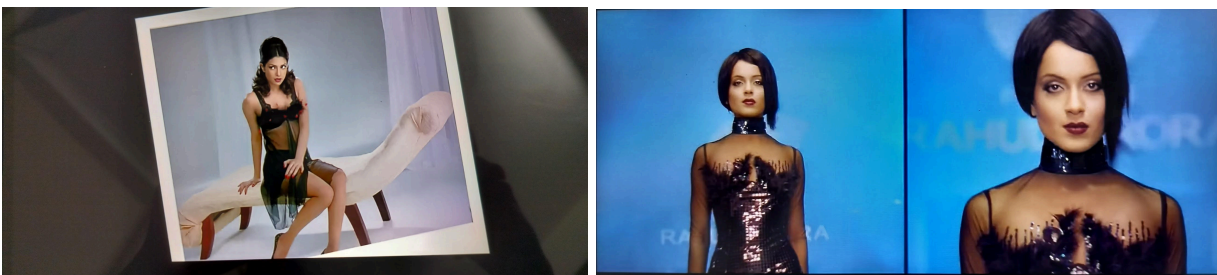




Fig. 3.18, 3.19 and 3.20 Women as spectacles in the fashion industry

They are concerned about the woman's body size and body image, although the main focus is the clothing items. Women are spectacles as well as the subject of this film. The movie reveals how models are viewed in the fashion world; hangers or eye candy. The existing male gaze in the fashion industry is reflected in the film. Meghna constantly competes with Shonali (Kangana Ranaut) to be the top model and as she climbs the ladder she loses sight of her close ones. Her life is completely controlled by the 'big daddy' of the fashion industry Abhijit Sarin who helps her rise in the fashion industry as well as brings her downfall; this can be viewed as Abhijit reasserting his power over her by punishing her for rebelling against him. Abhijit, who was married, treats Meghna solely as an object for sexual pleasure which becomes clear when he asks her to abort their child. Bhandarkar is often criticised for portraying sympathy-seeking pitiful images of women in his films which can be observed in this film as well. Once Meghna loses everything due to her extra-marital affair with Abhijit (Arbaaz Khan), she turns to substance abuse. Her career being taken away from her can be viewed as Abhijit punishing her (sadistic voyeurism); Abhijit had inflicted the same crisis on Shonali. Her moral conflict which follows displays her seeking pity and sympathy from the audience. Soon she comes to terms with her reality and decides to restart her career all over again. This is the moment in the film where Meghna regains control over her life and career. The movie shows how the ones in power always control the lives of those who lack power. Despite Meghna resenting Shonali throughout most of



the film, the last half an hour of the film feels refreshing as Meghna attempts to help Shonali through her crisis.

Other films which depict women helping each other include *Veere Di Wedding* (2018) and *Bulbbul* (2019) directed by Shashanka Ghosh and Anvita Dutt Guptan, respectively. On its release *Veere Di Wedding* was heavily criticised for the way it represented women; critics argued that there wasn't empowerment of women as promised in the trailer. Furthermore, it was criticised for its over-the-top costumes, foul language used in the dialogues, mediocre underscore, poor direction and an overdose of advertisements. The movie was even banned in Pakistan for its explicit language and depiction of sexuality. However, an admirable aspect of the film was the women being unapologetically themselves and this could be the main reason why many people did not like the four friends Kalindi (Kareena Kapoor Khan), Avni (Sonam Kapoor), Sakshi (Swara Bhaskar) and Meera (Shikha Talsania) as they are not what society expects women to typically be like. The film discusses various issues like body image issues, life after marriage, the pressure to get married and strained marriage. Instead of being passive, women in the film constantly talk about the problems they are facing. They do not shy away from talking about orgasms and their sex life. A scene praised by many critics for its realistic portrayal of female sexuality is Sakshi's masturbation scene portrayed by Swara Bhaskar (Fig. 3.21).



Fig. 3.21 Realistic portrayal of female sexuality

Although the stories of these women are presented in a Masala format who belong to wealthy families their struggles seem universal, for instance, something as common as the fear of getting married (Kalindi) or not being able to find one's Mr. Right (Avni). Despite being directed by a male, the film does not engage with the male gaze but rather focuses on female friendships.

Unlike *Veere Di Wedding*, *Bulbbul* is a critically acclaimed film for its portrayal of empowered women. It employs horror, gothic, and supernatural elements in its narrative. The film makes use of *the Chudail* (witch) mythical creature from Indian folklore to weave a story of an emancipated woman. The film discusses many of women's concerns such as child marriage and widowhood. In the beginning, it is revealed that the central character Bulbbul (Tripti Dimri) was married to a much older Thakur Dada Indranil (a wealthy lord played by Rahul Bose) as a young girl. Indranil's younger brother, Satya (Avinash Tiwary), becomes her closest friend and as they grow up Bulbbul develops feelings for him, sensing the same Indranil sends off his brother abroad. Twenty years later when Satya returns, he finds a completely changed Bulbbul. Dutt presents Bulbbul as a reformed character. From a timid and naive Bulbbul, she reforms to a woman who exudes confidence and power. She comes across as a person who holds the highest authority. The change can be noticed in the following frames (Fig. 3.22, 3.23).



Fig. 3.22 and 3.23 Bulbbul's transformation

The flashbacks reveal the atrocities Bulbbul incurs; she was beaten up by Indranil, scarring her feet, and raped by Mahendra (Indranil's twin brother) which leaves her dead. The scenes (Fig

3.24, 3.25, 3.26, 3.27) portray a woman's helplessness as she is tormented by the men in her life; a display of sadism.

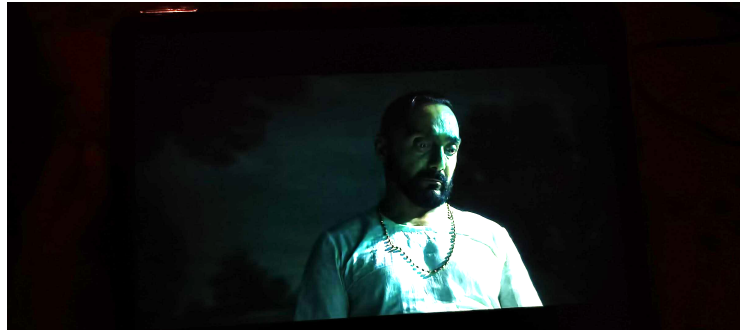


Fig. 3.24 Indranil staring at Bulbbul



Fig 3.25 Indranil's view

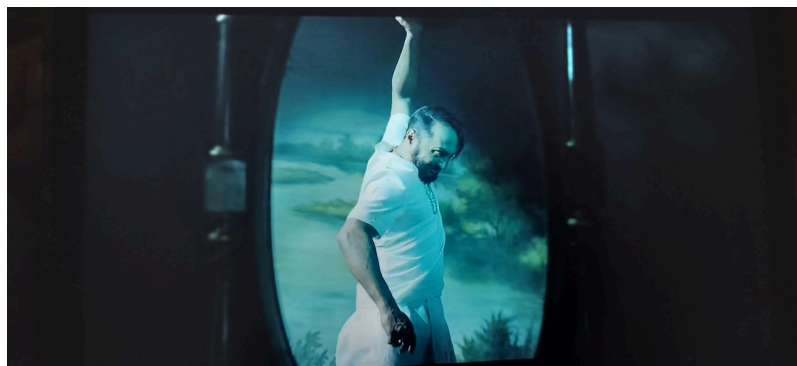


Fig. 3.26 Display of sadism



Fig. 3.27 Helpless Bulbbul

It can be observed that men in her life wanted to possess her and assert their control over her. Her desires or wishes were never taken into account. However, the plot twist appears when she resurrects with the blessings of Goddess Kali to avenge her death and help women who have faced the same ordeal. Hence, the *Chudail* who goes around killing monstrous men is none other than Bulbbul. The following dialogues between Satya and Bulbbul foreshadow this twist,

Satya: Master Dinkar was killed. And it wasn't an animal. It's the work of man.

Bulbbul: Why? Why not a woman?

What woman is capable of such a brutal murder? (*Bulbbul* 0:26:50)

Dutt uses the fearful and dreaded character of *Chudail* to denote a strong empowered woman who is no less than a Goddess protecting fellow women. The red lighting and colour grading throughout the present time scenes in the film symbolise this transition which is meant to create fear as well as empower women. The film problematizes the male gaze which is exemplified through Indranil and Mahendra's characters who try to control Bulbbul; specifically, Mahendra's obsession with Bulbbul comes across as fetishistic (Fig. 3.28, 3.29) as he compares her to a doll. Both characters are at the receiving end of punishment instead of the other way around.



Fig. 3.28 and 3.29 Mahendra's fetishistic gaze

Bulbbul's death ultimately liberates her from the constrained walls of the palace and empowers her. Interestingly, parallels were drawn between Dutt's feminist characters and Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray's characters, when asked about drawing inspiration from the same in an interview with WION, Dutt said,

Not consciously, but I love both Tagore and Ray. I am deeply moved by Tagore's women- by their strength, their tragedy, their fragility and their helplessness. Besides Tagore was a feminist. He had a female gaze. Same with Ray, so I think they played a huge part subconsciously. Because I love Ray's writing too, and how he raises women. (Sen)

Her statement further proves that men can and have written good female characters; it is only possible if the director and writer understand the female perspective.

Lastly, the recently released film *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* (2023) directed by Karan Johar contains glimpses of the male gaze as well as glimpses of men becoming the objects of the look. Introductory scenes of both characters involve close-up shots of their bodies (Fig...) which are manifestations of fetishistic scopophilia. However, the movie touches upon subjects of toxic masculinity, rape culture and misogyny throughout the film. In one of the scenes where Rani meets Rocky for the first time she can't help but stare at his exposed abs (Fig. Fig. 3.30, 3.31).





Fig. 3.30 Rani staring at Rocky's chest



Fig.3.31 Rocky's exposed chest

Interestingly, this scene is placed right after Rani's character confronts a politician on the objectification of women and rape culture. When Rocky notices her looking at his abs she quickly follows by saying that she wasn't objectifying him, but was surprised by his unbuttoned shirt, "Do you always wear low unbuttoned shirts." This scene is supposed to be comedic, however, if the genders were switched this statement would have caused negative outrage. This statement comes across as hypocritical as it is placed right after her interview with the politician. This scene is an example of the existing problematic female gaze. The movie is a mass entertainer packed with over-the-top dialogues, dramatic twists and melodramatic scenes. Rani and Rocky decide to stay at each other's places to see if they and their families are compatible

with each other. Rocky and Rani's father's scenes are refreshing as they break down the concept of toxic masculinity. Likewise, Rani helps Rocky's mother and his sister realise their dreams and move beyond the boundaries of the Randhava family. Although Rani and Dhanlaxmi (Rocky's grandmother) are shown as rivals, they are both strong women characters who are independent and passionate about what they do. However, Dhanlaxmi's character upholds traditional values, despite being the matriarch of the family, she looks down upon the other women in her family. Dhanlaxmi is a classic example of a woman upholding patriarchal values. The ideals of patriarchy are ingrained in the minds of women as well due to social conditioning. This makes women upholding traditional values go against those who break away from the same. The two women, Rani and Dhanlaxmi, represent modernity and tradition, respectively. The film ends with modernity winning over tradition i.e. women being liberated from the archetypes set for them.

As can be observed through the above analysis women's representation has evolved in the 21st century Bollywood cinema. This also marks the age of more women filmmakers and directors in the Indian film industry. Though the number remains comparatively smaller than the men in this business, it is still more than it was ever before. Not only that but the filmmakers, irrespective of their genders, have ventured out into female-centric cinema. Women's stories are told by both men and women. The above examples show that irrespective of the gender of the director, if they are informed about ideals of equality and perceive women as subjects rather than objects, they are capable of presenting a realistic image of women. Examples like *English Vinglish*, *Bulbbul* and *Mimi* prove Mulvey's argument wrong that only the rejection of pleasure can make good films with good female representation. One could argue that since women have first-hand experiences of the ordeals faced by women, they can write and direct better female characters. This is definitely true, however, we do have several examples of male directors

portraying authentic female characters in the mainstream as well as parallel cinema. Despite the advancements, it is undeniable that films like *Kabir Singh* do exist which are full of misogyny and toxic masculinity. Even if problematic representations of women exist people are quick to call them out on social media or elsewhere. Due to the widespread awareness about feminist movements, the influence of films on young minds and how they perpetuate societal ideologies and a common desire for an egalitarian society, the audience does not shy away from criticising problematic representation on screen. The last film analysed also raises questions regarding the emerging or existing problematic female gaze which often goes unnoticed. Nonetheless, in terms of women's representation, it is safe to conclude that Bollywood is heading forward in a positive direction.

### **3.3 Are these films “Feminist-Friendly”?**

An interesting fact about the Bechdel test is that it started as a joke meant to comment on the lack of female representation in cinema. The three criteria of the test evaluate the presence of women on screen. In her comic strip where the test was first mentioned, Bechdel presents two women discussing which movie to watch when one of the friends mentions the three requirements that a movie must fulfil to qualify as watchable. Bechdel, herself, categorised this as a ‘little lesbian joke’, however, the test brought to light the lack of screen time and screen space women have in mainstream cinema. Although it began as a satirical commentary on the state of women in cinema, it was later accepted as a theoretical framework to assess women’s presence in film, especially in the 2000s. However, it is important to note that the test has its own flaws; it’s a quantitative rather than qualitative method. Therefore, even if films pass the test, it does not promise good portrayals of women.



Nonetheless, in this study, the test is employed to understand and analyse the relationship between the female characters in the chosen films and their interactions. As for the first requirement, all films chosen have two or more female characters. Hence, they all fulfil the first criteria. Moving onto the next requirement, that is having these female characters interact with each other. Except for *Kabir Singh*, the other nine films pass the second requirement as well. Women in *Kabir Singh* lack interactions with one another as they are all presented only in relation to the male protagonist. The female characters in the film such as Preeti and Jiah Sharma (an actress who falls in love with Kabir) are treated as objects by Kabir; object of obsession and object of sexual pleasure, respectively. Hence, the film certainly cannot qualify as feminist-friendly. While assessing the third requirement, an evaluation of the kinds of conversations women have in the remaining nine films is done below.

Starting with *Fashion*, the film does fulfil the last requirement as well. Meghna's character interacts with multiple women characters and the conversations mostly revolve around her career. Throughout the film, Shonali and Meghna's relationship evolves from rivals to friends. The conversations they have in the first half of the film are more like witty exchanges between the two who are competing against each other to secure the supermodel position. However, in the end, the conversation they have before Shonali's death highlights Shonali motivating and encouraging Meghna to pursue her dream of modelling again. This conversation plays a significant role in Meghna's decision to continue modelling. Similarly, in *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani*, the interactions between Rani and Dhanlaxmi are full of animosity; both trying to win against each other. On the contrary, Rani has pleasant interactions with Rocky's mother and sister. This is where she makes them realise that they are independent individuals themselves who choose how they wish to lead their lives. The mother ends up fulfilling her

dream of becoming a singer while the sister rebels against her grandmother to pursue her desired career. Hence, this film also qualifies for the test. Likewise, in *English Vinglish* Shashi's niece, Radha, can be seen encouraging and supporting Shashi's quest to learn the English language. Conversations between women in this film revolve around their lives rather than men, making it Bechdel-approved. Similarly, the interactions between two friends, Mimi and Shama, in the film *Mimi* are heart-warming as they highlight female friendships. While Mimi was at her lowest, it was Shama who stood by her side throughout her crisis. Being left by her husband, Shama was facing her own challenges, however, in one of the conversations they have right after Mimi is abandoned by the foreign couple, Shama comforts Mimi by saying that she will take care of the child while Mimi can still pursue her dream of becoming an actress.

*Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* presents two women as each other's love interests. Although the movie passes the Bechdel test, the scenes between the two female leads are minimal. Most interactions between the two happen only at the end of the film. It can be argued that since the same-sex couple was meant to be the central conflict of the film, they deserved more scenes together. The next set of films does involve women discussing men, but that is not all that they talk about. Therefore, it becomes difficult to denote whether they pass the test or not. These films include *Queen*, *Dil Dhadakne Do*, *Veere Di Wedding* and *Bulbbul*. In *Queen* the interactions between Rani and Vijaylaxmi aid in Rani's journey of self-discovery. Likewise, in the film *Veere Di Wedding*, the four friends' conversations are not limited to men, they talk about their desires, aspirations and feelings, and how they wish to overcome the problems they face. Making these conversations relatable to the audience. On the other hand, the conversations between the mother-daughter duo in *Dil Dhadakne Do* come across as frustrating. Ayesha, who is struggling with her marriage, attempts to find someone she could confide in. However,

whenever she tries to talk to her mother about the same, her worries are brushed off and she is lectured on how she should work towards saving the marriage rather than destroying it. It was only revealed later that the mother, Neelam, herself was a victim of a troubled marriage and to please society she presented a facade of happy marriage to the others. The conversations between Bulbbul and Binodini (wife of Mahendra played by Paoli Dam) display Binodini instructing Bulbbul how she should act as a noblewoman (Binodi refers to Bulbbul as Milady). However, the conversation that Binodini has with Bulbbul after she is raped, makes up one of the most impactful scenes in the film. The following dialogues highlight Binodini's suffering as well,

Binodini (to Bulbbul): You have married into a royal family.

Why the tears? Stay quiet...

He's a little insane, but he'll be fine after marriage.

He is a little insane, but he's a royal blood. Keep quiet.

He's a little insane, but you'll be adorned with jewels.

He's a little insane, but you'll be draped in silk.

He's a little insane, but you'll be respected. Keep quiet.

He's a little insane. If not him, then his brother will look after you.

Large manors have large secrets, be quiet. (*Bulbbul* 1:11:06)

Although, in the above-mentioned scene, Binodini can be seen talking to Bulbbul, it can be also interpreted as her repeating what she was told before getting married to Mahendra. In this way, the above lines represent the compromises he had to make at the cost of her happiness. Therefore, Mahendra's death symbolises not only Bulbbul's revenge but Binodini's liberation from an unhappy marriage. One can argue that the last four films do not pass the Bechdel test owing to the flaws of the test. However, although women's conversations involve men, they are

not central to these interactions. Instead, these interactions place the feelings of the women involved and their dilemma at the centre. Therefore, whether the films qualify for the test or not, they are indeed 'feminist-friendly.'

To conclude, over the years women's interactions in films are not limited to men, especially a male love interest. Women are not seeking male validation anymore, rather can be seen expressing their concerns regarding varied issues they face including those related to men. Therefore, through the analysis of the ten chosen films, it can be concluded that the representation of women on screen has evolved over the years with more films treating women as the subject rather than the object.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN ITEM, AN OBJECT AND THE OTHER

*Not the girls, but the tag 'item girl' should be completely banned. Media has given birth to this phrase and I really find it derogatory.*

~Kunal Kohli

The previous chapter dealt with identifying voyeurism in the entirety of a film. This chapter, however, focuses solely on a unique feature of Bollywood films referred to as ‘item numbers/songs’ and its voyeuristic nature. Bollywood is known globally for its entertaining song and dance sequences. All mainstream Hindi films can be categorised as musicals for their excessive use of multiple song and dance routines. One of them is ‘item numbers’ which are usually guided by the male gaze as typically a sexy, hot and enticing woman is expected to be performing to these songs. This chapter, divided into two sections, discusses the origins, features and debates surrounding the racy dance form and the term associated with it, secondly, it presents an analysis of three dance numbers which featured in three of the ten selected films using Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze.

#### 4. 1 The Origins, Features and Debates

Music and dance are integral parts of Indian culture and traditions. Bollywood borrows a lot from Indian folk traditions; elaborate song and dance sequences are a result of the same. For instance, the ancient Indian theatre and dance doctrine *NatyaShastra* written by Bharat Muni functions as a manual to understand Indian aesthetics and it lays heavy importance on the incorporation of song and dance sequences in theatre to convey appropriate emotions. It has largely influenced modern Indian art forms, including Bollywood. Moreover, according to Barnouw and Krishnaswamy the popularity of music and dance numbers in Indian cinema is

attributed to, firstly, its association with the regional theatre of the nineteenth century which made great use of songs and secondly, music acts as a catalyst in a country with huge linguistic diversity (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 97). Over the years, filmmakers have not only made use of song and dance routines to amplify the dramatic effect of the film but also as tools of narration. Different genres and styles of songs are used to convey different emotions and moods. For example, in *Kabir Singh*, the song “Bekhayali” depicts the angst and agony felt by Kabir post-break-up, similarly, the song sequence “Fashion Ka Jalwa” in the film *Fashion* introduces the audience to the world of fashion; the setting of the film. However, there are also song and dance sequences purely meant for promotional purposes. As Ganti says

Songs are absolutely essential to the marketing of a popular Hindi film. There have been very few examples of popular Hindi films without songs. Not having songs communicates that a film is outside the mainstream of the Bombay film industry, possibly even an “art film”, and to most people in the industry, this means death at the box office... There are plenty of rumours and stories within the industry about producers, distributors, and financiers pressuring filmmakers to add songs to films to increase their prospects at the box office. (Ganti 84)

These songs are necessarily required in the film and do not add anything to the narrative. For instance, the song “Jhumka Gira re” in *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* didn’t necessarily drive the plot further or establish the tone of the film. It was simply meant to be a modern rendition of an old classic to attract the masses who already loved the song. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the majority of popular Hindi music comes from the Hindi film industry as both industries, music and film, are closely intertwined.

Alongside, multiple Bollywood song and dance genres such as romantic, devotional, patriotic, melancholic, comical etc. stands the infamous and controversial ‘item’ songs; evolved terminology for cabaret dance sequences in commercial Hindi cinema, item songs, typically feature overly sexualised women, vivaciously dancing to a racy and catchy song. The settings and costumes in these songs vary from folk-inspired to funky disco scenes. These dance sequences hold a significant place in the Hindi film industry and popular culture as they are used as tools to attract a large audience, usually men. The picturisation of women in these songs is to catch the male. The revealing outfits, erotic dance moves, lustful lyrics and close-ups of female body parts like hips, lips, chest, waist, legs etc. have become common features of all item songs. Common camera shots in these dance numbers include heavy close-ups of the dancer’s body, a woman dancing amidst a crowd of men glaring at her, and women seducing men. Hence, more often than not, these songs and dance sequences are criticised for objectification of women and explicit portrayal of sexuality. The relevance of these songs to the narrative is arguable; some films do make use of these dance sequences as a narrative tool while others simply add them as a mass entertainer. The terms ‘item song’ and ‘item girl’ were first used in the late 90s to refer to the iconic song “Main Aai Hoon UP Bihar Lootne” and that is how the well-known Bollywood actress, Shilpa Shetty, came to be known as the very first ‘item girl’ (Kumar 339). Similarly, another dance number which popularised this term during this time was “Chaiyya Chaiyya” featuring Malaika Arora and Shah Rukh Khan. The Indian audience was enamoured of the exhilarating dance routine on top of a train to the beats of a refreshing composition. The term was then evidently popularised by Indian media.

Although the term originated in 1998, similar dance sequences were common in earlier Hindi films. Moreover, women dancing in front of huge crowds to songs full of suggestive lyrics

have always been a part of mainstream cinema across different Indian states. Over the years, especially in the 40s and 50s, the dance numbers became more elaborate with glamorous costumes and exotic dances like Helen. The advent of coloured cinema further helped in enhancing these sequences. Dancers like Helen are still remembered for their electrifying dancing skills which could grab the attention of everybody in the room, she also invented a whole new style of performance referred to as Indian cabaret (The Swaddle 2:47). These dance sequences soon became a must-have element of Bollywood films. It became such a staple that even the success of a film and its marketability were dependent on the same. However, the social connotations of these dance sequences remained negative. In the 1960s women performing cabaret sequences were usually the vamps in the storyline as their dubious morals, habits and tastes would align with the immoral connotations of these dance routines (Kumar 338). This would also provide a good contrast to the leading lady of the film who was supposed to be the emblem of purity, morality and dignity. Hence, these dance numbers were associated mainly with villainous characters. Although this difference remained largely visible through the 70s and 80s, actors such as Zeenat Aman and Madhuri Dixit broke these boundaries by performing the same enticing dance sequences as the female protagonists. Hence, starting from the late 80s, more leading heroines began performing the dance routines which were once only reserved for the vamps. Madhuri Dixit's "Ek Do Teen Char" became an instant sensation and drove the film to immaculate heights of success; the song became so popular that viewers flooded the theatres only to watch her dance (The Swaddle 4:02). However, social implications of these dance numbers remained the same, therefore, the female character was required to have a strong reason to perform the dance numbers which were termed as immoral. In *Tezaab*, Mohini was forced to dance by her abusive father, while, in *Roop Ki Rani Choron Ka Raja* the dance sequence "Hawa



Hawaii” acts as a distraction for the perpetrators. Ultimately, starting from the late 90s, the dance sequences, now, referred to as item songs stand independent from the narrative. Special dancers or performers like Shilpa Shetty and Malika Arora featured in these songs have little to do with the plot of films. This has been the case up until now. Although many directors still incorporate dance numbers as a plot device, the majority of item songs are purely a marketing tool. Madhur Bhandarkar (director of the film *Fashion*) while agreeing with the craze of ‘item songs’ says (as reported by Times of India),

An item song acts as an additional attraction to the movie and grabs more eyeballs, be it of the audience or the distributors. No wonder then that almost all Bollywood biggies are being roped in for item songs. Stars have their own fan following and if they do a special number, it does add to the movie's craze.  
(Verma)

Some song sequences do not even feature within the film and are only added during credit or post-credit scenes. These songs have also brought a lot of popularity to the dancers. Today, with music shows on television and YouTube, the dance numbers can be released independently in advance to create a buzz around the films.

Even though these dance sequences have become an essential part of mainstream commercial cinema, it is to date heavily criticised for their treatment of women as objects. Needless to say, there are dance sequences where the roles reverse and men become the centre of the gaze while being surrounded by women, however, the term ‘item’ is rarely associated with them. The term is often used otherwise as a slang for ‘sexy lady’ or a seductress. Due to its redundant nature and negative connotations, many critics have demanded the removal of item songs altogether. Debates still revolve around: its implications, whether women should

participate in these songs or not, and whether the formulaic dance numbers shall be removed from films or not. Many critics such as Shabana Azmi argue that women should stop participating in dance sequences which objectify them as they are the ones who are giving into the male gaze while some view item songs as an unapologetic display of female sexuality by a woman; in terms of the lyrics as well as choreography. Blaming women for participating in these songs would be unfair as they are professional dancers doing their job, likewise, viewing these songs as symbols of female sexual liberation would mean blatantly ignoring the implied male gaze dictating how these songs are to be filmed. No matter the lyrics of these songs and their themes, the way the dance sequences are filmed, they are meant to attract the male gaze. For instance, the song “Sheila Ki Jawani”, if one listens to the song solely, is about self-love. The lyrics show that Sheila is tired of being stalked and followed by others (men) and all that she wants in life now is to find a man who meets her demands. Although the lyrics seem to empower, the male gaze dominates the picturisation of this song choreographed and directed by Farah Khan. Hence, whether these song and dance sequences are empowering or demeaning remains blurred.

From the analysed list of films (Chapter III), films like *English Vinglish* and *Bulbbul* prove that films can be commercially successful without the inclusion of irrelevant overly sexualised dance numbers. However, does that mean this genre of song and dance should be completely done away with? Malaika Arora in an interview with Film Companion said the following when asked whether she would do an item song or not.

I’m not going to say ban all these songs and stop with so-called item songs. I always had a problem with it being called an item song, imagine somebody turning around and calling me *Ye Kya Item Hai!* (What an item!) I would want to

turn around and slap that person. I do have a problem with the terminology over there but I'm not going to say stop it and completely get rid of it. At the end of the day our films are all about that culture, there is a certain song and dance that's been there from time immemorial. Why should one just change it overnight? Yes, if something is not right in terms of being offensive then do away with it, but, this is a part of our films. (FilmCompanion 8:00)

As can be observed some are in favour of keeping dance sequences alive while others oppose the same. However, one must understand that the major problem is not the elaborate dance sequences, glamorous outfits or the one dancing, rather, it is the way women are filmed and presented solely to attract the male gaze; the term 'item' itself is problematic as this is where the objectification begins. This slang term's problematic connotations render women the status of an object. Hence, most critics argue that the term itself should be done away with. Consequently, the use of the term 'item' is gradually fading away in the Bollywood scene due the excessive criticism. Many already argue that Bollywood right now is in its post-item song stage with actresses rejecting to do certain song sequences and directors like Karan Johar refusing to add item songs to their films due to the heavy objectification of women. However, there are still films featuring dance numbers in different ways and forms. Now that the origins, features, and debates surrounding the term 'item' and picturisation of the same are discussed, the next section will deal with the analysis of three dance sequences "Param Sundari", "Girls Like to Swing" and "Hungama Ho Gaya" from the selected films *Mimi*, *Dil Dhadakne Do* and *Queen*.

#### **4.2 Items or Dancing Queens?**

The songs chosen for analysis are dance numbers performed by women in their respective films. This analysis aims to identify whether the directors/choreographers utilise these

dance sequences for character or narrative exploration or purely as exhibitionist tools. The lyrics, camera angles and frames shall be studied to examine whether these songs retain common features of ‘item songs’ or if they have modified and defied the features discussed in the previous section. The very first dance sequence in the film *Mimi* appears at the very beginning of the film as an introduction to the titular character Mimi. As discussed in Chapter III, Mimi was a dancer who aspired to be a film actress. She belonged to a family closely associated with Indian music and dance traditions. Therefore, the setting appears to be courtesan culture or folk-inspired. The introductory dance performance is supposed to establish her as a talented dancer with big dreams. Although the song sequence seems relevant to the film, it does retain features of a typical ‘item song.’ The song starts with close-up shots of the dancer, followed by men trying to woo her (Fig. 4.1, 4.2).



Fig. 4.1 Mimi's close-up shot



Fig 4.2 Men staring at Mimi

Common shots of a woman laying down and performing amidst a big group of men lusting over her (Fig. 4.3, 4.4) find a place in this song as well.



Fig. 4.3 Mimi's laying down shot



Fig. 4.4 Mimi as the object of the look

However, it is important to note this song sequence is a performance within the storyline, hence, as a performer, it can be assumed that Mimi is aware of being looked at by others. Additionally, the lyrics of the song are presented as a dialogue between her and the men. Men compare her to various entities, from a 'basket of oranges' to other beautiful female figures like 'Mona Lisa', 'Lolita' and 'Kadambari.' In the lyrics, Mimi is objectified by men as they talk about her waist which makes their pulse rate go high, her attractive body is from head to toe, and her

over-the-top beauty. However, Mimi rejects these advances by saying that she has eyes only on a career, that is becoming a film actress as can be seen in the following lyrics.

*Pairon mein payal ki bedi se bandh ke main na rehne wali*

You can't lock me with the anklets in my feet as shackles

*Main alhad purva ke jaisi hoon pardeson tak behne wali*

I'll flow everywhere just like the easterly wind

*Mujhe gehno se badhke sapno ki chahat hai*

I like dreams more than ornaments

*Jin sapno ko sach ho jaane ki aadat hai*

The dreams which have the habit of coming true

*Katti hai meri mardon se*

I don't talk to men

*Yaari filmon ke pardon se*

I'm only friends with the films

(Bhattacharya 17-22)

Hence, even though in the lyrics she is objectified by men, she can be observed firmly rejecting it. Although, at first glance, the song seems like a typical dance number meant to attract greater viewership, it fulfils two major purposes in the film; firstly, to introduce Mimi as a dancer, and secondly, to establish her dream of becoming a Bollywood star. Despite the picturisation leaning towards the voyeuristic side, Mimi can be observed claiming and maintaining her position as the subject rather than the object through the lyrics.

Similarly, the dance sequence to the song "Girls Like to Swing" is meant to introduce Farah as a dancer to the viewers. It's a song that highlights women enjoying themselves rather



than focusing on the gaze. Farah and the other dancers are seen dressed in flapper-style dresses of the 1920s and the song itself draws inspiration from Jazz music (Fig. 4.5, 4.6).

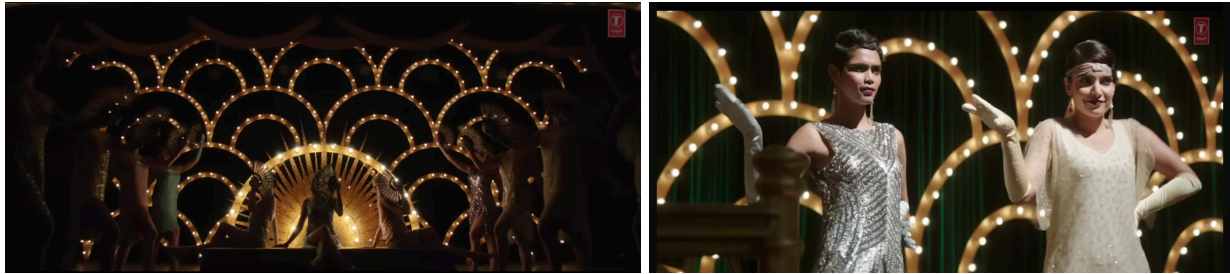


Fig. 4.5 and 4.6 Setting and costumes inspired by the flapper girl fashion

The group of girls dancing alongside Farah can be seen interacting with one another and having fun on stage as they get to what they love the most; dance freely (Fig. 4.7, 4.8).



Fig. 4.7 Girls having fun



Fig. 4.8 Girls enjoying the performance

Voyeurism persists in this song too as the camera cuts to shots of Kabir looking at Farah (Fig. 4.9).



Fig. 4.9 Kabir watching Farah dance

Farah, a true performer, can be seen interacting with the crowd including Kabir. However, instead of approaching Kabir, Farah pulls Ayesha with her and the song ends with the two of them dancing together and enjoying themselves (Fig. 4.10).



Fig. 4.10 Ayesha and Farah dancing together

The camera angles or frames do not overly sexualise the dancers, rather, every frame captures women on stage having fun. The lyrics also suggest the same, especially, the chorus.

*Girls Like To Swing*

*Swing...*

*Zara Aage Nikal Ke*



After putting a step forward, Swing...

*Naye Rangon Mein Dhal Ke*

After getting coloured in new colours

*Swing...*

*Andaaz Badal Ke, Yani Hichkichana Nahi Hai*

After changing style, which means no hesitation

*Swing...*

*Masti Mein Hai Jeena*

Life should be lived in an exciting manner

*Swing...*

*Jeevan Ras Peena*

The nectar of life should be drunk

*Swing...*

*Ye Baat Hui Na, Yani Ab Sharmaana Nahi Hai*

This is what we agreed to, which means no more shyness

(Akhtar 14-26)

The lyrics are all about enjoying life to its fullest. It encourages women, especially, to let go of their shyness and do what their hearts desire. The lyrics 'Girls like to swing' celebrate the joy and freedom women feel while dancing, perhaps, it can also refer to women's free expression for seeking sexual pleasure. Overall, the lyrics are simply about having fun with no regrets. The lyrics and picturisation break the stereotypical mould of an 'item song' as they explore a female perspective on celebrating freedom and enjoyment. It is noteworthy that both songs are written

by men from a female perspective, proving, that men can write songs meant for women's empowerment.

Lastly, the remixed version of the iconic song “Hungama Ho Gaya” appears in the film *Queen*. The song was originally written in the 70s by Verma Malik, while, Anvita Dutt Guptan rewrote the song, adding new lyrics, for the film *Queen*. In *Queen*, the song is filmed at a club just like the original. However, the differences exist in the way the two sequences are filmed and the way they portray women. The original is a disco-themed dance number, reminiscent of the structure of an item song. The secondary character Rita dances to the tunes of this song while expressing her frustration over how others perceive her. Although the picturisation of the song follows the features of a typical ‘item number’ (Fig. 4.11, 4.12), the lyrics expose the hypocrisy of society where she questions what is the big deal about her drinking and having fun when everybody else does too.



Fig. 4.11 Rita surrounded by men looking at her



Fig. 4.12 Example of the male gaze

The lyrics reveal that she just wants to have fun and not be limited by others' perceptions of her. Likewise, in the film *Queen*, in every single frame of the dance number, Rani can be seen truly enjoying her time at the club; going all out with dance moves without caring about others' looks or perception of her (Fig. 4.13, 4.14).



Fig. 4.13 Rani dancing freely at the club



Fig. 4.14 Close-up shot of Rani having fun

It is refreshing to see a woman enjoy her freedom. During the dance sequence, flashbacks of her past relationship appear where she was told by her ex-fiance to not embarrass him in front of everyone by dancing wildly. This is the very first instance where Rani overcomes her fear associated with her broken relationship and candidly enjoys her own company. Hence, this song and the corresponding scenes hold great significance in the narrative. Voyeurism finds no place in this song sequence. It is important to note that Anvita Dutt Guptan (Director of *Bulbbul*) is one of the few female lyricists in the Bollywood industry. Aside from the above track, most of the songs from *Queen* are written by her. The majority of songs in Bollywood whether ‘item songs’ or others are written by men, and only a handful of female lyricists find a place in this industry. In one of the interviews conducted by Rajeev Masand on his YouTube channel titled Bollywood’s Top Songwriters on Craft and Credit, Dutt Guptan was the only female lyricist among the six interviewees. Although this may not be a strong argument to substantiate the lack of female writers in Bollywood, it does highlight the divide between the two. However, it is encouraging to see writers like Dutt Guptan change the scene for female writers and inspire more women to join this industry.

To conclude, it can be observed that the three analysed songs defy some of the common features of ‘item songs.’ It also proves that a female dance sequence is not merely to satisfy the male gaze. It is difficult to say that Bollywood has completely rejected this dance genre, as hints of the same can be found in multiple films to date. However, the growing awareness of people and critics regarding the problematic nature of the term ‘item number’ and the picturisation of the same has led to choreographers and directors presenting women differently on screen; as a subject. There are instances of gender reversal as well with songs like “Heartthrob” in the film *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* presenting Rocky as a man every woman lusts over (Fig. 4.15, 4.16).



Fig. 4.15 Rocky surrounded by women



Fig. 4.16 Women looking at Rocky and lusting over him

This raises more questions: is Bollywood heading towards objectifying men? Nonetheless, the term 'item' is still largely associated with women and whether Bollywood will completely discard this dance form or modify it to counter the criticism, only time will tell. However, it is safe to conclude that Bollywood has come a long way in terms of its representation of women.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

*There are changes coming about, there are women demanding good roles and refusing to work in films unless they have participation. They want to do something and they demand something and they are getting something to do and I think that's exciting...*

~Zeenat Aman

This research aimed at identifying voyeurism and women's objectification in mainstream Bollywood films. Additionally, through the analysis of the chosen films, one can observe the evolution of women's representation and their presence on screen. Women have always been the object of the look, whether in cinema or otherwise. Mulvey's feminist film theory aimed at deconstructing the unconscious reflections of patriarchal ideologues in mainstream visual narratives. Although the theory belongs to the seventies, the concepts discussed by Mulvey can be applied to recent cinema as well including Bollywood which was the main focus of this study. Chapter I lays down the objectives and research questions of this dissertation. One of the main objectives of this study was to trace the evolution of women's representation on screen while simultaneously conducting a comparative study between women's representation by male and female directors. Both objectives were fulfilled in Chapters III and IV. The hypothesis derived at the beginning of the study stated that over the years representation of female characters has gradually evolved in mainstream Bollywood cinema, although, differences exist in the ways women and men portray female characters; both are capable of displaying relatable, authentic and realistic female characters and their experiences irrespective of their gender. It can be observed through the analysis conducted that the hypothesis has been tested and proven right.

To understand the evolution of women in films in the 21st century, understanding the past of Bollywood in terms of women's representation was required. Hence, Chapter II provides an overview of female representation throughout the history of mainstream Hindi cinema; beginning from the silent age till the late 90s. Within the 20th century itself, women's representation had already undergone various changes, starting from mythical archetypes to independent female characters. It was only during the late 20th century that women characters portrayed had much more substance than being mere exhibitionist tools. Likewise, this was also the time when more female filmmakers appeared within the domain of Hindi cinema.

The main analysis chapter, Chapter III, while focusing on the chosen ten 21st century films, analyses how the representation of women has changed in recent times. This also marks the age of an insurgence of female directors and filmmakers. The first section of the chapter gives a detailed explanation of the theories and concepts applied in the study; Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory and Alison Bechdel's Bechdel test. The next section deals with the application of these theories in the chosen films. The combination of films chosen includes four films directed by women and six directed by men. As can be seen in Chapter III, voyeurism does exist in today's cinema, but how it is dealt with depends on the director. The analysis shows that although women directors have an inherent female perspective which aids their representation of women on screen, many male directors have attempted to present authentic and relatable female characters and have succeeded in the same, films such as *Queen* and *Mimi* are great examples of the same. This does not mean overlooking women filmmakers' contribution to Hindi cinema, rather, it simply means celebrating those who have represented good female characters on the big screen, irrespective of their genders. If one is well-informed about the female perspectives and considers female spectatorship while making a film, they can be capable of writing and directing



female characters which are free of stereotypes and prejudice. Films like *English Vinglish* and *Bulbbul* prove that films can be female-centric and commercially successful while rejecting the male gaze. Although, films like *Kabir Singh* engage extensively with voyeurism, in recent years people have been quick enough to call out the problematic representation of women in films like these, which has largely encouraged Bollywood filmmakers to work with films that empower women rather than demean them. Therefore, a change in the representation of women can be felt and seen in 21st-century Bollywood cinema. The next section of the chapter conducts a Bechdel test of the chosen films. Here, one can observe how women's interactions with one another in the films have changed over the years; from talking only about men to discussing each others' desires and aspirations. This chapter highlights important interactions between women in the narratives.

The fourth chapter problematizes the term 'item songs/numbers' which is closely associated with women and analyses the representation of women in Bollywood song and dance sequences. The first section of the chapter lays down the origins and features of the term followed by debates surrounding the same. The three chosen songs ("Param Sundari", "Girls Like to Swing", "Hungama Ho Gaya") and their analysis are meant to show how the concept of 'item numbers' has changed over the years; from focusing on the male gaze to female pleasure and enjoyment. The analysis of the song lyrics and its picturisation shows that the chosen dance sequences lay more importance on women's feelings rather than the viewers. The rejection of the term 'item' by many filmmakers and the modified versions of dance numbers to suit the feminist lens proves that women's representation in Bollywood song and dance sequences has also evolved in recent times.

As for further studies, one can examine the emergence of the problematic female gaze and its manifestation in films where it is the men who are objectified. Some of the examples of the same are briefly mentioned in Chapters III and IV. Similarly, since Mulvey's feminist film theory heavily relies on binary oppositions of man and woman, one can examine the concepts of 'gaze' from a wider perspective inclusive of all genders. Overall, the purpose of this study was to understand and examine the evolution of women in mainstream Hindi cinema through the lens of Mulvey and Bechdel's theories which it has fulfilled.

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