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## Changing the Script: Redefining Hindi Cinema through Female Lens

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*“Aaj bhi ek ladki apne sapne poore kar sakti hai. Agar wo thaan le, toh kuch bhi kar sakti hai.”*

– *Secret Superstar* (2017)

*Women, who form 48.4% of the population in India, are essentially the backbone of society. Women, since time immemorial, have been playing a wide range of roles and have been making contributions in different fields, where one such field is the cinema industry. Initially, the industry was more male-dominated and women played a peripheral role and were portrayed in an idealistic and nurturing way, lacking decision-making power. However, with the evolution of the society, the role of women in the industry gradually expanded. The present cinema encompasses women as strong protagonists and has been a strong force behind the camera as directors, cinematographers, producers and writers. Even after changes in the representation of women in Indian cinema, issues such as harassment, objectification, unrealistic beauty standards, pay disparity, work-life balance, maternity and career breaks stand as a potential challenge to the success of women in the industry. In this scholarly discourse, the author intends to overview the portrayal of women in early cinema along with its evolution. The author further discusses women’s characters in different movies as role models and catalysts for change while throwing light on the contribution made by women behind the camera. The discerning analysis aspires not only to expound upon women as protagonists but also to enrich the intersectionality and diversity of women’s representation in cinema while focusing on challenges still pertaining to Hindi cinema for women. The paper concludes by making suggestions and recommendations to address the challenge.*

**Keywords:** *cinema, female lead, screenwriters, social change, iconic characters, feminism.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indian cinematic industry has been among the nation's most popular sources of entertainment, spanning decades of performances since its inception in the 1900s.<sup>1</sup> According to studies and surveys, Indian films are screened in over a hundred countries and watched by nearly four billion people worldwide. The Indian film industry is considered to be the largest film industry in the world, with over 1000 films produced each year in more than 20 languages.<sup>2</sup> Dadasaheb Phalke made the first Indian full-length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, in 1913, and such was the societal circumstances that he had to cast a male, Anna Salunke, to play the role of Harishchandra's wife, Taramati. But things changed when he made his second film, *Bhasmasur Mohini*. Phalke offered the role of Paravati to Durgabai Kamat and that of Mohini to her teenage daughter Kamlabai Gokhale (née Kamat). Durgabai Kamat thus became the first-ever female actor of Indian cinema and Kamlabai Gokhale became the first female child actor of Indian cinema.<sup>3</sup> Since its inception, Indian cinema has been a subject of constant evolution in relation to the themes of the movie, characters of the movie, songs and dialogue choice and every little and big detail. Women in the cinema industry have been a strong pillar and have made significant contributions to the industry through their diverse roles and acting skills. The roles and representation of women in the cinema have drastically changed overtime. From their representation as being dependent on male counterparts to taking the story forward independently, women in Indian cinema have undergone a significant change. Since a decade, Indian cinema has come forward with stories that are women-centric and that address the societal, professional, personal and sexual issues that women face in everyday life in an

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<sup>1</sup> Snigdha Deshmukh, 'Women and Indian Cinema – A Tale of Representation' (*MIT POST*, 20 January 2020) <<https://themitpost.com/women-indian-cinema-tale-representation/>> accessed 16 May 2024

<sup>2</sup> Ruchi Agrawal, 'Changing Roles of Women in Indian Cinema' (2014) 14(2) *Silpakorn University Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts* <<https://www.thaiscience.info/journals/Article/SUIJ/10969014.pdf>> accessed 16 May 2024

<sup>3</sup> Asmita Pant, 'Who was the first-ever Indian female actor – and more' *CNBCTV 18* (India, 07 March 2023) <<https://www.cnbctv18.com/entertainment/international-womens-day-durgabai-kamat-the-forgotten-women-of-indian-cinema-16101461.htm>> accessed 16 May 2024

innovative manner. Therefore, the recent development in the entertainment industry and the influential, positive, independent and strong portrayal of women stand as a powerful tool to bring social change.

The objective of this research paper is twofold. Firstly, to analyse the evolution of female characters and narratives in Indian cinema and secondly, to examine the women in cinema and behind the camera as catalysts for social change and address the challenges faced by women in the industry.

## OVERVIEW OF PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN CINEMA

**1950s: Traditional and Idealistic Portrayal** – Indian cinema during the 1950s was highly based on the concept of ‘Bhartiya Nari’ when it came to women. Women were characterised as submissive, chaste and idols of sacrifice. They were portrayed as the epitome of sacrifice, dutiful wife and motherhood. ‘Mother India’, released in 1957, portrayed the female lead as the epitome of sacrifice and motherhood. This film not only underscored the centrality of the mother figure in Indian storytelling but also translated into a template for the creation of female characters in contemporary cinema.<sup>4</sup> By 1957, some movies started to change the narrative and portrayal of women. One such example is ‘Pyasa’, which presented a nuanced perspective on women who live on the fringes of society, questioning moral and societal benchmarks. This decade laid down a complex tapestry of femininity where women were characterised through a patriarchal lens.

**1960s – 1970s: Transition Period** – During this period, Indian cinema saw a transition in the role and portrayal of women. Actresses retained the traditional virtues but subtly pushed the boundaries. The character played by Waheeda Rahman in the 1965 masterpiece, ‘Guide’, was therefore unusual. Here, Rosie left her unfaithful and unsupportive husband in the film to pursue her passion and be with the man she wanted. She left him, too, when he didn't turn out to be who she thought he was. This simple idea of consent and freedom was way ahead of its time, which is why the film is considered to be an aberration.<sup>5</sup> The other perspective witnessed

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<sup>4</sup> Nasreen Munni Kabir, *Talking Films: Conversations on Hindi Cinema with Javed Akhtar* (OUP 2000)

<sup>5</sup> Maisha Islam Monamee, ‘Feminism and Bollywood: How the portrayal of women has evolved’ *The Daily Star* (India, 08 March 2023) <<https://www.thedailystar.net/entertainment/tv-film/news/feminism-and-bollywood-how-the-portrayal-women-has-evolved-3265961>> accessed 16 May 2024

during this period was the emergence of the vamp figure in Indian cinema, which contrasted with the commonly held notion of the 'mother-housewife role' reflecting the sexual division of labour prevalent in society.

**1970s - 1980s: Idealistic to Realistic** - This era of Indian cinema marked a significant shift from traditional and restrictive roles to glamorous, modern and bold roles. Zeenat Aman redefined the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema through films like 'Yadon Ki Baarat' and 'Hare Rama, Hare Krishna', where her character challenged the conservative norms and was represented as a symbol of modernity and sexual liberation. Her roles tried to break the socially imposed restriction on women's sexual autonomy and pursuit of their desires without notions of morality being attached to it. There was a shift towards social issues and women's rights for instance, films like 'Ankur' portrayed sexual and emotional emancipation, while 'Bhumika' explored the life of an actress and the conflicts she faces in her personal and professional life to seek autonomy.

**1990s - 2000s: Romanticization and Modern Relationships** - The period of 1990s and 2000s focused on romanticisation family dynamics with a hint of independence in it. Women were portrayed as romantic leads, for instance, 'Juhi Chawla in Ishq'. The female leads were portrayed as dutiful wives in films based on family dynamics like 'Kabhi Khushi, Kabhi Gamm', 'Hum Saath-Saath Hai'. The cinema also witnessed the exploration of sexuality and modern relationships through movies like 'Dil Se' and 'Fire' which explored female sexuality and same-sex relationships. The parallel cinema showcased powerful female characters. Films like 'Bandit Queen', which portrayed the transformation of victims into strong and resilient women, had a liberating impact on women. This era witnessed a balance between modernity and traditionality with a hint of women's agency and autonomy.

**The 2000s - 2010s: Autonomy and New Aspect** - The era of the 2000s was an era of change in Bollywood, especially for women. The portrayal of women from traditional conservative roles was replaced by strong, independent and empowered portrayal. Many notable films made a significant contribution in establishing female autonomy and independence. Films like 'Chak de India' which showcased women as strong, ambitious and career-driven, and 'Fashion' which portrayed the life of a modern woman in the fashion industry and the challenges she faced in

the quest for success. Films like 'Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna' were ahead of its time as it portrayed infidelity and female desires, showcasing women unapologetic of their needs and choices. Films like 'Dor' explore the bond between two women from different cultural backgrounds, showcasing the themes of strength, friendship and empowerment.

**2010s - Present: Empowerment and Evolution** - This era of Bollywood marks a significant evolution. Hindi cinema saw a significant shift towards more empowered, diverse and female-centric films. The movies during this period explored different aspects of women and the challenges they faced. Films like 'Pink' explored the concept of consent, while 'Thappad' explored the theme of domestic violence and subtle patriarchy. Biopics like 'Dangal', 'Mary Kom', 'Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl', and 'Shakuntala Devi' highlighted the achievements of women along with the struggles and triumphs in their journey. Films like 'Queen' and 'Dear Zindagi' showcased strong protagonists who celebrated female independence and self-discovery, while 'Tumhari Sulu' showcased the journey of a housewife who became a successful radio jockey, fulfilling her dreams. Indian cinema explored different women's perspectives and societal issues in the late 2020s with films like 'Bulbul' which showcased women's rise from innocence to strength, 'Gangubai Kathiawadi' which showcased the life of a powerful woman of a red-light area and 'Darlings' which through dark comedy showcased story of a woman seeking revenge against her abusive husband.

## **WOMEN AS PROTAGONISTS AND ROLE MODEL**

The era of Indian cinema from the 2000s saw a significant shift from a traditional and conservative portrayal of women to a much more liberating portrayal reflecting changing societal norms. Various female characters transcended the traditional boundaries and showcased to the audience the diverse, complex and empowered figures. There have been iconic characters that inspired the audience by breaking the stereotypes and showcasing the strong, resilient, empowered and multifaceted aspects of a woman's life and struggles. Some of these iconic characters are -

**1. Vidya Bagchi in Kahani (2012):** The character of Vidya Bagchi, played by Vidya Balan in Kahani, depicts the strength, intelligence and resourcefulness of a woman. The story revolves

around Vidya, a pregnant woman who comes to India from London in search of her missing husband. As the story evolves, it showcases Vidya's ability to outsmart those around her, which depicts how strategic and resourceful a woman can be. The character is well known for breaking the stereotype of pregnant women as helpless and dependent by showcasing how even pregnancy cannot stop a woman if she has a resolve in her mind to achieve a goal. The traits of courage, emotional resilience and leadership are evident throughout the movie. From making critical decisions and escaping the deceit on her own to showing her vulnerable side, the character of Vidya Bagchi stands as a realistic and inspirational character. The climax of the movie reveals that Vidya was not pregnant, as she suffered a miscarriage on seeing the corpse of her dead husband, who was an Army officer who died in a poison-gas attack. In order to avenge the death of his husband and unborn child, she faked her pregnancy. The character very strongly portrays how a woman can powerfully avenge for everything she has lost.

**2. Rani Mehra in Queen (2013):** The character of Rani Mehra, played by Kangana Ranaut in Queen, depicts the personal growth, independence and self-discovery of a woman whose fiancé, Vijay, calls off the wedding a day before the ceremony. This leaves her shattered, but she decides to go on her pre-planned honeymoon to Paris and Amsterdam alone. This decision marks the start of her journey of self-discovery and growth. As she reaches Paris, she is exposed to a new world, a world she has never been a part of. As she navigates the unfamiliar cities alone, she becomes self-reliant and confident. As the story evolves, Rani finds new friends and she is offered to participate in a cook-off event, which she later wins. When Rani's ex-fiancé approaches her to give their relationship another chance, Rani, who is now independent, confident and self-reliant, is somehow confused and agrees to meet him for a talk. She leaves him in the café to be with her friends which depicts that she now makes her own choices and decides her priorities. The climax of the film showcases Rani returning from Amsterdam to Delhi, where the first thing she does is to meet Vijay. She returns the ring and says 'thank you', which depicts that he gave her a chance at self-discovery by rejecting her and now she is self-reliant and confident enough to lead her life on her own terms. This character serves as a powerful role model through her journey of self-discovery, independence and empowerment. Her transformation from a naive, dependent girl to a confident, self-assured woman inspires audiences to embrace change.

**3. Sehmat Khan in Raazi (2018):** The character of Sehmat Khan, played by Alia Bhatt, is a character that serves as an exemplary role model. The story revolves around the life of an Indian spy during the Indo-Pak war in 1973 who is married into a Pakistani Military Family to serve as an undercover agent. Sehmat's willingness to sacrifice her life for the country depicts her selflessness and unwavering love and dedication for her country. The story also depicts how an innocent-looking woman has the ability to stand courageously for her country. While dealing with and balancing her personal relationship with the man she is married to and the mission for which she was married, her emotional strength has been portrayed beautifully. Her role inspired many people to respect and appreciate the sacrifices made by such brave figures and also contributed to the discussion about the role of women in national security and the importance of recognising their contributions.

**4. Shivani Shivaji Roy in Mardaani (2014):** The character of Shivani Shivaji Roy, played by Rani Mukherjee, depicts the story of a fearless and powerful police officer tackling human trafficking and other crimes. Throughout the story, her character portrays traits of courage, determination, fearlessness, leadership and empathy. The opening scene of the film introduces Shivani investigating and commanding a crime scene, which establishes her as a fearless, authoritative and courageous woman. Her resourcefulness and mindfulness are portrayed throughout the movie as she investigates to uncover the circle of human trafficking. Her compassionate and empathetic side is shown along with her courageous side when she visits the family of a missing child, Pyaari, to console and assure them. The film stands as a significant movie based on advocacy for women's rights, showcasing the fight against human trafficking, gender inequality and sexual violence, which are the grim reality of our contemporary society. Shivani serves as a beacon of hope and empowerment for women. Her role as a fearless and dedicated police officer makes her a symbol of inspiration and empowerment.

**5. Bulbul in 'Bulbul' (2020):** The character of 'Bulbul', played by Tripti Dimri, showcases a feminist tale of a naïve child bride who grows to be a powerful woman. The story revolves around the main protagonist 'Bulbul' who is married to an older man 'Indranill' while she develops a friendly bond with her brother-in-law, Satya, who is of her age. Suspicious and jealous of the bond between Satya and Bulbul, Indranil brutally beats Bulbul and breaks her

leg to keep her confined. The breaking of legs symbolises how women are ripped off their agency and decision-making by their own husbands and are made to be dependent on them eternally. While her treatment is in process, her elder brother-in-law, Mahendra, who is mentally ill, rapes her while she is helpless. The mental illness of the brother reflects the illness of society, which treats women as an object of pleasure. Further, rather than succumbing to her pain, she recovers herself from the physical and emotional trauma and takes the responsibility of punishing the men who wrong the women of her village with her own hands. Her transformation from a naïve and victim to a powerful figure who avenges wronged women of her village symbolises empowerment and a sense of justice. The way she reclaims power after the trauma stands as a metaphor for the ray of hope and empowerment for those who have been wronged. In the climactic scene, Bulbul confronts Indranil, symbolising her true empowerment as she stands strongly against her oppressor, reversing the power dynamics. The film concludes by depicting Bulbul as a guardian spirit. Her enduring presence as a guardian spirit highlights her unwavering commitment to justice and protection. Her role transcends personal revenge, embodying a larger mission of safeguarding the oppressed.

Such roles played by women are significant since they stand as a testament to the direction of social change that society is witnessing and also the miles which are yet to be covered.

## WOMEN BEHIND THE SCENES

The chief and creative force behind any film is its director. Indian cinema has been a male-dominated cinema, but with evolution and the feminist movement during 1970s in India as well as the West, women created a strong place for themselves in the cinema as actresses, directors, screenwriters and producers. The female perspective of seeing the world is very different from men as it adds a significant dimension of justice, compassion and commitment, and some exceptional female movie directors have proved that. Some of the prominent women directors who have crafted masterpieces and achieved success include –

**Gauri Shinde** – Gauri Shinde is a prominent filmmaker who is known widely for her women-centric films. She made her debut in filmmaking in 2012 with ‘English Vinglish’, featuring Sridevi, which beautifully depicted the life of a mother and housewife, overcoming her



insecurities and earning her own identity apart from being someone's wife and mother. The film was released on 14 September 2012 at the Toronto International Film Festival, followed by its commercial release in India and worldwide on 5 October 2012, and went on to receive both critical and commercial success. Later, she came up with another beautiful film 'Dear Zindagi' which again was a female-centric movie focusing on mental health and the challenges of a career-oriented urban woman, like her landlord asking her to vacate the house as she was a single woman having male friends. She portrayed mental health and emotional issues with a subtext of feminism and urbanism. She was shown to excel as a cinematographer, which is usually a male-dominated profession in Indian cinema. She was shown to pursue her career independently, irrespective of her emotional troubles. She has been awarded as best debut director in Filmfare Award and IIFA for English Vinglish.

**Meghna Gulzar** - Meghna Gulzar, daughter of lyricist Gulzar, as she was known initially, made her own identity in Indian Cinema through her marvellous direction and screenwriting. She directed her first movie, *Filhaal*, in 2002, which explored surrogacy and female friendships, which were not looked favourably in society at that time. 'Talvar', directed by her, based on the Noida double murder case, premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2015 and was critically acclaimed. She broke the mould of women making family-oriented films only by directing a crime thriller. Another instance of her tremendous direction is 'Raazi', a female-dominated movie which explores the life of an undercover spy during Indo- Pakistan war, it became one of the highest-grossing Bollywood movies with earnings of 193 crores and also brought Filmfare award for the best direction under the name of her. 'Chhapak', which showcased the life and struggle of acid-attack survivor Lakshmi, was highly critically acclaimed and strengthened her role as a catalyst for change by highlighting the issues women face and how powerfully they overcome them to become a source of inspiration. Her recent direction was 'Sam Bahadur', which showcased the life of the military officer Sam Manekshaw. Her direction has always been successful in the powerful portrayal of real-world stories with an appropriate blend of emotions and practicality.

**Konkana Sen Sharma** - Konkana Sen Sharma is known as a brilliant actress and an actor who has something to say about her choices. She has been making waves in Hindi cinema for more

than 15 years now and was always been known for choosing wonderful characters with a feminist edge. She has successfully donned the director's hat as well. She made her directorial debut with a Bengali film in 2006 and made her debut in Hindi cinema by Hindi film 'A Death in the Gunj' in 2017.<sup>6</sup> The film premiered at the 2016 Toronto Film Festival and received critical acclamation on the theatrical release. She received the award of best director at the New York Indian Film Festival and MAMI Film Festival. She received Filmfare Best Debut Director for the same. Her accolades speak of her abilities as a director who dares to venture into uncharted territories by making realistic thriller cinema.

**Alankrita Srivastava** - Alankrita Srivastava is a prominent name in contemporary cinema known for her bold portrayal of women and their choices. Her notable works include 'Lipstick under My Burkha', the release of which was stopped by the censor board in India due to its explicit and sexual content and language, but was later granted a green signal as the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal asked censor board to issue A certificate to a movie after few changes. The movie focuses on the inner lives of four women of different age and backgrounds and their sexual desires and fantasies. The movie was praised for its real and bold depiction of women's needs and choices and was awarded with numerous awards, like the Spirit of Asia Award at the Tokyo International Film Festival and the Oxfam Award for Best Film on Gender Equality at the Mumbai Film Festival. Another notable work by her includes 'Dolly Kitty Aur Who Chamakte Sitare', which explores the lives of two cousins based on themes of female desire, societal expectations and the quest for freedom. 'Bombay Begums' is a Netflix series which follows the lives of 5 women from different walks of life. The series was praised for its layered storytelling and complex characters, highlighting issues such as workplace harassment, infertility, and the quest for autonomy. It sparked important conversations about women's roles and rights in modern society.

Women screenwriters in Hindi cinema have been pivotal in creating authentic and empowered characters. Their point of view depicts the strengths, challenges, aspirations, desires and choices of women, challenging the patriarchal mindset and empowering the women. Not only women

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<sup>6</sup> Aashay Gatade, '5 FEMALE FILMMAKERS WHO ARE REDEFINING NORMS IN INDIAN CINEMA' (Seamedu, 10 May 2024) <<https://www.seamedu.com/blog/5-female-filmmakers-who-are-redefining-norms-in-indian-cinema>> accessed 26 May 2024

but men written by female screenwriters aim at redefining the typical male characters by adding layers of empathy, understanding and realism. These men challenge the stereotypes, offer a new narrative of masculinity and focus on gender equality in Hindi cinema.

## **WOMEN WRITTEN BY WOMEN**

**Gauri Shinde** - Gauri Shinde is popularly known for writing and directing authentic and realistic characters. The character of 'Shaashi Godbole in English Vinglish', written by Gauri Shinde, showcases the life a homemaker who enrolls into English learning classes. This begins her journey of self-discovery, where she reminds herself that respect is of paramount importance in any relationship, whether husband-wife or mother-daughter. She not only reminds herself of this but also to others that how respect is the basic building block of any relationship and that she deserves it. The film has powerfully depicted the worth of the homemaker alongside self-worth, empowerment and the value of respect in any relationship. The character of Shashi resonates with numerous Indian women who face similar challenges in their daily lives. The movie was highly praised for its realism and women-centricity.

**Juhi Chaturvedi** - Juhi Chaturvedi has crafted many notable works where one of them is the character of 'Piku Banerjee in Piku' which portrays story of a working woman balancing her professional life and personal life while taking care of her father. The character stands as relatable character as she is portrayed as strong and independent woman who does not confine to the societal expectation of marriage and traditional role of caregiving. The character was highly praised for its depth and authenticity. She also directed 'October' which also shows the development and maturing of a deep and meaningful relationship between the protagonists Dan and Shiuli.

**Reema Kagti** - Reema Kagti has explored severe genres from psychological thriller as 'Talaash' to sports drama like 'Gold'. She has been collaborative with Zoya Akhtar to co-write several successful films like 'Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara' and 'Dil Dhadkne Do'. The character of 'Laila in Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara' and 'Farah in Dil Dhadakne Do' depicts character of strong headed, carefree and independent women who are full of life while character of 'Ayesha in Dil Dhadakne Do' depicts the life of a businesswoman who is often subjected to patriarchal mindset

by her own family and husband and how she deals with her personal relationships. The female characters in these movies were highly praised for being realistic and relatable.

**Alankrita Srivastava** – Known for her bold portrayal of women, Alankrita Srivastava has successfully crafted the short films, films and web series which depict the desires and choices of women. The female characters in ‘Lipstick under my Burkha’ depicts women from different backgrounds and religions and their sexual desires. The film was criticized by some section of the society for its bold take but at the same time was appreciated by another section for highlighting a non-explored side of women life. She also crafted sexually autonomous characters in the movie ‘Dolly kitty aur wo chamakte sitaare’.

**Anvita Dutt** – Anvita Dutt is a well-known dialogue writer, screenwriter, lyricist and director. Her notable female characters include Bulbbul in the movie ‘Bulbbul’ which showcases rise of a naïve girl into a powerful avenger. And the character Qala in the movie ‘Qala’ which showcases ugly side of ambition and abusive childhood. Her other notable works include ‘Phillauri’ and ‘Patiala House.’ Her works often features strong woman lead exploring the themes of empowerment.

## **MEN WRITTEN BY WOMEN**

**Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti** – The character of ‘Kabir in Dil Dhadakne Do’ is depicted as sensitive and compassionate man breaking the stereotype of toxic masculinity who is shown grappling with emotions and open discussing his feeling in stark contrast to the traditional male characters like ‘Manav’, his brother-in-law who used to dictate the choices and decisions in household. The character is depicted as a man who respects and values the choices and opinions of women in her family. The character of ‘Sunny in Dil Dhadakne Do’ is depicted as a strong headed man who gets into an argument in one of the scenes with Manav, who tried to impose the ideas of toxic masculinity and patriarchy. His stance was significant because it put forward the views that others were hesitant to voice.

**Juhi Chaturvedi** – The character of ‘Rana Chaudhary in Piku’ is portrayed as empathetic and patient man who supports and respects Piku’s independence and choices. He did not force Piku

to accept her feelings but supported her decision of staying with her father for taking care of him. The character was a significant figure in redefining the heroism as supportive and empathetic. The character of 'Vicky in Vicky Donor' is portrayed as a carefree young man who becomes a sperm donor. His character was a breakthrough to normalize the conversation of sperm donation and fertility which was hardly touched upon in Indian cinema. Juhi Chaturvedi often writes characters who are emotionally intelligent and non-hesitant to pursue non-traditional gender roles starkly contrasting with the traditional roles portrayed in Indian cinema.

**Gauri Shinde** - The character of 'Dr. Jehangir Khan in Dear Zindagi' is portrayed as a compassionate and empathetic therapist who help the female protagonist to deeply understand her emotions. He enables her to overcome her insecurities and develop meaningful relationship with her family with whom she became distant since young age. Throughout the film he is portrayed as a progressive man, who respects boundaries by strictly adhering to difference between personal and professional relationship. He is non-judgmental of modern-day relationship and enables the protagonist to take pride in her search for true love by engaging with different men and exploring herself. He is characterized as a strong and understanding man offering wisdom and guidance without imposing traditional male traits.

## **INTERSECTIONALITY & DIVERSE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN HINDI CINEMA**

In the intricate tapestry of feminist narratives, the concept of intersectionality emerges as a vibrant thread, weaving together diverse experiences and identities. Like a prism refracting light, it illuminates the multidimensional layers of oppression and privilege that intersect in our complex world. By recognizing the intersectionality of oppression, we comprehend that the challenges faced by women are not uniform. For instance, a Dalit woman's experiences of gender inequality are further compounded by caste discrimination, amplifying her struggle. Similarly, a queer woman's battle for equality encompasses the intersections of gender and sexuality. Indian cinema, as a cultural mirror, reflects these intersectional narratives. It has the power to challenge and transform societal perceptions by portraying diverse stories that embrace the

complexities of women's lives. By highlighting the realities of discrimination and privilege, cinema can contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender dynamics.<sup>7</sup>

## REPRESENTATION OF DALIT WOMAN IN HINDI CINEMA

Dalit women, bearing the burdens of caste and gender discrimination, have long dwelled in the shadows of Indian society. Their voices silenced; their stories untold. Yet, amidst this injustice, a glimmer of hope emerges through the lens of feminist cinema.<sup>8</sup> Films like *Bandit Queen*, *Article 15*, *Masaan* highlighted the caste-based oppression faced by the women which made the long-suppressed voice of them being heard.

'*Bandit Queen*' is a biographical film exploring life of Pholaan Devi, a Dalit woman who became a bandit and later a politician. The film portrays her struggle including oppression, sexual violence, discrimination and her strength to rise through all the odds. '*Masaan*' released in 2015 was highly praised for its realistic portrayal of caste and gender. The film showcases 2 narratives one of which is life of Devi Pathak, a young woman from lower caste who struggles through everyday silent battle of caste discrimination. '*Article 15*' is a crime drama revolving around the gang rape and murder of young Dalit women in rural area of India. The movie throughout showcases the investigation and caste-based oppression. While the film is centered around an upper-caste protagonist, it effectively brings out the systemic caste discrimination and the harsh realities faced by Dalit women.

## REPRESENTATION OF LGBTQ+ IN HINDI CINEMA

Two notable films, '*Fire*' (1996) and '*Margarita with a Straw*' (2014), unfurl their celluloid canvases to illuminate the multifaceted queer experiences and trials encountered by LGBTQ+ individuals. These cinematic marvels probe the depths of societal constraints and dare to question the prevailing norms. They beckon the viewer to confront the narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals, amplifying their voices and validating their existence.

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<sup>7</sup> Prince Prasad and Rahul Tiwari, 'FEMINISM IN INDIAN CINEMA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS' (2023) 8(7) IJNRD <<https://www.ijnrd.org/papers/IJNRD2307118.pdf>> accessed 28 May 2024

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

Through fiery flickers of celluloid, 'Fire' ignites a flame of consciousness. It weaves a tale of forbidden love between two women trapped in the suffocating grip of patriarchal chains. The film masterfully dissects the complexities of desire and the yearning for liberation, exposing the stark reality faced by queer women in a heteronormative society. It boldly challenges conventional notions of femininity and explores the boundaries of individual agency. Similarly, 'Margarita with a Straw' extends a tender hand, inviting us into the world of Laila, a young woman with cerebral palsy exploring her bisexuality. In this poignant tale, the film navigates the uncharted waters of disability, sexuality, and self-discovery. It deftly unravels the intricacies of intersectionality, interweaving the threads of gender, disability, and queerness into a vibrant tapestry of empowerment.<sup>9</sup>

## WOMEN AS CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Bollywood, the vibrant and ever-evolving Indian film industry, has transcended its boundaries as mere entertainment and has become a powerful catalyst for social change. Over the years, it has shed its conventional narratives and stereotypes, embracing diverse stories and characters that challenge societal norms. Bollywood has emerged as a formidable force in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality. Long gone are the days of passive female characters confined to stereotypical roles. Today, we celebrate films like 'Queen,' where a young woman embarks on a journey of self-discovery and independence. Movies like 'Pink' and 'Dangal' have shattered societal expectations, depicting women who fight against injustice and excel in traditionally male-dominated fields. These narratives inspire women across the nation, challenging oppressive norms and empowering them to embrace their potential.<sup>10</sup> Some of the characters that broke the stereotype and stood as catalyst for change include:

**Amrita from 'Thappad'** – The character of 'Amrita' played by Tapsee Pannu in 'Thappad' serves as a powerful catalyst of change while showcasing theme of deep-rooted patriarchy and domestic violence. Apart from Amrita, movie showcases lives of 4 other women from different

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Dattatray Kadam, 'Breaking Barriers: Examining the Changing Narratives and Social Impact of Bollywood' (*Medium*, 2 July 2023) <<https://medium.com/@onscreenseries/breaking-barriers-examining-the-changing-narratives-and-social-impact-of-bollywood-b2aee6eaf38a>> accessed 29 May 2024

background i.e. her house help, her neighbor, her brother's girlfriend and her lawyer. The opening scene of the film introduced Amrita, the protagonist, as a dutiful wife whose life revolves around her husband's dreams and aspirations. The turning point of the film is when her husband, Vikram, slaps her in a party in frustration of his work in front of family and friends. This slap changes the entire narrative for Amrita, as she realizes her worth and quest for a happy and dignified life.

### **Catalyst for Change -**

- **Personal Awakening:** A single incident of slap makes Amrita question her worth and lack of respect in her marriage. She realizes her husband may love her but her quest is just for happiness and respect. After much thought, she decides to leave her husband's house for few days to process the incident, but unapologetic behavior of her husband makes her chose divorce as an option.
- **Legal and Social Stand:** Amrita decides to take legal action against her husband when her husband sends her legal notice to return back to her matrimonial home. This step was not just against a slap but the systematic patriarchy. When her lawyer asks the reason for divorce, is just a slap? She says 'It is just a slap, but he cannot' represents her strong stand.
- **Inspiration to Others:** Amrita's decision influenced other characters around her. For instance, her lawyer who starts questioning her own marriage, reflecting on her compromises and her house help who decides to raise voice against her abusive husband who used to beat her daily.
- **Questioning Marriage Dynamics:** Amrita's character questions the traditional, conservative and patriarchal take on the institution of marriage. Despite societal pressure, she refuses to return to her husband's house for her own respect. She questions the narrative where women are often expected to endure and forgive transgressions to maintain marital harmony.

### **Impact on Society -**

- Amrita's character highlights the everyday instances of patriarchy which women face that often go unaddressed.



- Her character challenges the conservative and traditional approach towards the institution of marriage.
- Her character sparks debate over domestic violence, marital rights and mutual respect in any relationship.
- By pursuing legal action, her character also raises awareness about the legal avenues available to women facing domestic violence, promoting a sense of empowerment and knowledge among viewers.

The movie stands as a strong catalyst for change in terms of empowerment and women's rights. The theme of the movie left a thought-provoking message for the society that questions the marital rights and traditional approach towards the institution of marriage. Her character transformed from a dutiful housewife to a woman who stood for her self-worth and self-respect, challenging the patriarchal and traditional societal norms.

**Shashi Godbole from 'English Vinglish'** - The character of 'Shashi Godbole', played by 'Sridevi', is a powerful catalyst in changing the narrative of a housewife in society. The opening scene of the film portrays Shashi as a homemaker in Pune who runs a small business of making and selling Ladoos. Despite her dedication and love for her family, she is often ridiculed by her husband and daughter for her lack of proficiency in speaking and understanding English. The turning point of the movie is when Shashi travels to New York alone to assist for her niece's marriage, which provides her an opportunity to step out of her comfort zone and confront her insecurities. She joins English learning classes in New York, which assists her in boosting her confidence and realising her self-worth.

#### **Catalyst for Change -**

- **Confidence Building:** As Shashi travels to New York alone, she faces challenges while stepping out of her comfort zone. To overcome her insecurities, she joins English learning classes. As she gradually learns English, makes new friends in class and interacts with them, her confidence receives a boost. She begins to appreciate her own worth despite her role as a wife and mother.

- **Empathy:** Shashi's interaction with her classmates develops a sense of empathy and connection, portraying how mutual understanding and support can foster collective growth. For instance, when she calls out her classmates for making fun of the sexual orientation of their teacher, it reflects her empathetic and compassionate being.
- **Challenges Perceptions and Asserts Equality:** The climax of the film portrays Shashi raising a toast and speaking in English at her niece's wedding, which leaves her husband and daughter in shock. Her confidence makes her husband and daughter realize her worth and feel guilty for not respecting her for what she did for them. By the end of the film, Shashi's growth leads her to assert her equality in the family, subtly changing the dynamics and demanding respect without confrontation.

#### **Impact on Society -**

- Shashi's character challenges the stereotypical representation of housewives as her journey emphasises that housewives have their own dreams and talents and are capable of achieving them.
- Her character inspires women to recognise their self-worth and self-respect and not to be confined in four walls of societal pressure and expectations.
- Her character powerfully addresses the stigma attached to not knowing English in India and that a person's worth and talent are not dependent on his/her proficiency in the English language.
- Her character beautifully recognizes the undervalued labour of housewives that often goes unnoticed by the family members and calls for appreciation and recognition of efforts made by women of the family.

Thus, the character of Shashi portrays the life of almost every housewife who sacrifices her dreams and aspirations for her family, however, still her efforts go unnoticed or are undervalued. The character advocates for self-worth and self-respect and she stands as an inspiration for all the housewives who doubt their potential.

**Minal Arora in 'PINK'** - The character of 'Minal Arora' portrayed by Tapsee Pannu showcases an incident of sexual harassment and molestation. The film redefines the concept of consent,

advocates for women's rights and questions the patriarchal mindset of society who, judges a victim rather than the accused. The film begins with Minal, portraying her as a young and independent woman who lives with her friends Falak and Andrea. The plot of the movie builds on an incident which takes place when she attends a rock fest with her friends. They are invited over by Rajveer and his friends. What begins as a friendly gathering later turns into a nightmare for the girls as Rajveer and his friends attempt to assault and molest Minal while she resists. In her defense, she hit Rajveer with a glass bottle, leading to several repercussions. She is kidnapped and molested and later arrested with charges of attempt for murder. The film revolves around how she proves that she is the one who was the victim of Rajveer's attempt to molest her and not him.

### **Catalyst for Change -**

- **Standing up against Victim Blaming:** Victim blaming is a common phenomenon in India. Minal stands strongly against it and opposes all the blame and shame that has been put upon her. Despite social stigma and pressure, she resists from backing off, portraying her fight against victim blaming and shaming.
- **Advocacy for Consent:** The entire incident was based upon the issue of consent. Even after Minal said NO to a sexual relationship, Rajveer forced himself upon her. Her stance was clear that 'no means no' which became a powerful statement against excuses used to justify the acts of sexual harassment.
- **Challenging Patriarchal Norms:** The film not only showcases legal challenges and battles but also challenges the patriarchal norms and judgements upon the attire, choices, lifestyle and social behaviour of a woman that confines her and questions her character. For instance, Minal's previous relationships and her sexual encounters were questioned, and her partying late at night was questioned, but the behaviour of men was tried to be justified on the pretext of 'men will be men'.

### **Impact on Society -**

- Minal's character portrays the everyday struggle faced by women who are independent and make their own choices.

- Her character educates and raises awareness among the audience regarding the relevance and significance of consent.
- Her character sparked a debate over stereotyping and a conservative approach towards women while challenging the patriarchal norms that promote victim blaming and restrict the freedom and choices of women.
- Her character challenges the traditional representation of women as passive victims, as despite all the challenges, she decides to fight for her rights.

Minals' character stands as a symbol of courage, resilience, strength and fight for justice. Her character is a powerful tool of catalyst that advocates for women's rights and courage in odds, emphasising the significance of consent. Her character did not only inspire the characters in the movie but also the public to stand against sexual harassment.

**Jaya in 'Lapaata Ladies'** - The story of 'Lapaata Ladies' revolves around the life of two newlywed brides- Phool and Jaya, where Phool is left at the railway station as she is travelling to her husband's hometown after marriage while Jaya is another bride in the same train who is mistakenly taken home by Phool's husband, Deepak. It is later revealed that Jaya lied about her name to Deepak's family as she needed shelter for a few days so she could leave for Dehradun for studies rather than return to her husband's abusive and toxic household. This leads to a series of events that boosts Jaya's confidence and gives her a light of hope in the darkness to achieve her dreams.

#### **Catalyst for Change -**

- **Personal Transformation:** As Jaya ends up in the wrong household, she begins to experience a sense of freedom as she always desired for and the challenges she faces while staying in an unfamiliar household lead her to feel empowered.
- **Inspiring other Women:** Jaya's character inspired other characters in the movie. She inspired Deepak's sister-in-law to start sketching again (something she used to love). She inspires Deepak's mother to pay attention to her likes and dislikes, too, rather than just looking after the likes and dislikes of her family.

- **Challenging Patriarchal Norms:** Jaya challenges the patriarchal norms by questioning them throughout the movie. She demonstrates that women, irrespective of their background, have the capability to bring change and achieve their dreams.
- **Advocating for Women's Rights:** Jaya's character advocates for the rights of women. It sheds light on the issue of gender inequality and the lack of autonomy of women to make choices associated with their lives.

### **Impact on Society -**

- Jaya's character portrays the life of rural women in the most authentic manner, highlighting the challenges and expectations that confine their choices and needs.
- Her character sheds light on the traditional norms and customs that restrict women's choices and progress. For instance, Jaya's mother tells her to prioritise getting married rather than her studies despite her merit.
- In light of Jaya's experience, the film highlights the sensitive issues of gender inequality, lack of opportunities for rural women and curtailment of freedom in the name of marriage.

The film, released in 2024, received a grand success and was highly appreciated for its authentic portrayal. The theme of the movie was based on feminism and the empowerment of women in light of the lives of rural women. The film sparked a debate to bring changes in the patriarchal system so that women can have autonomy, at least to make choices regarding her lives.

**Sulu in 'Tumhari Sulu'** - The character of Sulu, played by Vidya Balan, is a cheerful housewife who lives with her husband and son in Pune. She is often mocked by her twin sister as she is not highly educated. Her life takes a turn when she wins a contest at a local radio station and when she goes to collect her prize, she auditions for the post of radio jockey. She is offered a job in a call-in night show where she will have to deal with callers calling to talk about their problems. She accepts the job, which becomes the catalyst for her transformation.

### Catalyst for Change -

- **Pursuit of Dreams:** Sulu aspires to be a working woman, but due to lack of educational qualification, she is unable to apply for white-collar jobs. When she receives an opportunity to be a radio jockey, she happily accepts it. It represents how keenly she wishes to pursue her dream of being a working woman.
- **Skill Development:** As Sulu starts working, her confidence boosts, she develops efficient communication skills and learns how to handle the odd situations. These skills enhance her confidence and help her realise her self-worth and identity.
- **Breaking Stereotypes:** Sulu's character challenges the notion that the life of a housewife shall revolve around her family and she shall compromise with her dreams and aspirations. Her character breaks this stereotype as she takes up the job.
- **Challenging Gender Roles:** Sulu's new job changes her dynamic with her family. Her husband, who was supportive in the beginning, begins to feel the strain of reversed gender roles as he faces difficulties in his own job. Her sister blames her for neglecting her family in quest of her dreams and aspirations.

### Impact on Society -

- Sulu's character represents the lives of an Indian middle-class housewife who juggles between her personal aspirations and family life.
- Her character highlights the everyday struggle faced by housewives while balancing their dreams and family life, self-doubt and societal judgments.
- By pursuing her unconventional career, Sulu challenges societal norms about gender roles and the limitations placed on women. Her story fosters dialogue about the need for a more inclusive and supportive environment for women to achieve their dreams.

The character of Sulu serves as a catalyst for change through her journey of self-discovery. She transforms from a housewife to a successful radio jockey who challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the importance of family life and aspirations.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN HINDI CINEMA

**Stereotyping & Typecasting:** Stereotyping and typecasting pose significant challenges for female protagonists. These powerful narratives are often confined within the boundaries of niche, hindering their potential to reach wider audiences and make a lasting impact. This limiting categorisation undermines the profound messages and relevance that females can bring to society. Female characters in films frequently find themselves confined to predefined roles, stifling their agency and reducing their complexity.<sup>11</sup> Women are often typecast in roles of dutiful wives, ideal daughters-in-law and dedicated and sacrificing mothers. Bollywood has attempted to empower the portrayal of women, but in one way or another, typecasting still prevails. Stereotyping is another challenge that stands for women in Hindi cinema, portraying them within the confined wall of traditional gender roles and patriarchal narrative.

**Harassment and Casting Couch:** Every industry has been plagued by issues when it comes to the wrongful use of power by authorities, and the entertainment world has had its own share of problems. One of Bollywood's most talked about concerns has been the topic of the casting couch. With the advent of a more wide-reaching media, many perpetrators of this crime have been apprehended, but to say that the casting couch has been completely eradicated would be a gross overstatement.<sup>12</sup> Most of the actresses have been victims of harassment and the casting couch and, on occasions, have boldly come forward to talk about it. One such instance is the actress Prachi Desai; she spoke candidly about her experience on the casting couch in an interview. She described how a filmmaker had approached her for sexual favours. Prachi disclosed that a man decides how people in the film industry want you to act. One is constantly observed from a male perspective, she claimed. The actor admitted that she had been told that she needed to be hotter and that she wasn't sexy enough. Additionally, she was informed that

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<sup>11</sup> Prasad (n 7)

<sup>12</sup> Tejashree Bhopatkar, 'Bollywood celebrities who spoke about casting couch' *The Times of India* (India, 05 May 2021) <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/web-stories/from-ayushmann-to-ranveer-bollywood-actors-who-shared-their-casting-couch-experiences/photostory/102617702.cms>> accessed 30 May 2024

she was too young to be cute and required to perform a hot song and sexy shoot. She discussed the direct and indirect attempts to harass her and how she responded.<sup>13</sup>

**Backlash & Resistance:** Feminist films, beacons of change, dare to challenge the shackles of patriarchal norms, only to be met with a fierce tempest of backlash and resistance. Like wild winds howling against their audacity, conservative quarters rise in protest, threatening to drown their voices in the abyss of silence.<sup>14</sup> For instance, films like 'Lipstick Under My Burkha' which highlighted female sexual desires and needs, faced censorship issue even before its release and was even criticised for its explicit content and 'Thappad', where a woman divorces her husband when he hits her in the middle of a party faced backlash for its perceived exaggeration of issue of domestic violence and people found it an unreasonable ground for divorce.

The clash between progressive ideas and entrenched values becomes a battleground, where swords of dissent clash against shields of tradition. Yet, despite the backlash, these films prevail. Their impact echoes far beyond the confines of the silver screen, seeping into the collective consciousness awakening dormant desires for a fairer world. The protests, threats, and boycotts only serve to ignite the flames of resistance, their futile attempts akin to sparks extinguished by the winds of change. In the face of adversity, feminist films stand tall, their message burning like an unwavering beacon of hope.<sup>15</sup>

**Lack of Funding & Pay Disparity:** Feminist filmmakers battle to secure funds and distribution avenues, facing an arduous journey. In their pursuit, they encounter hurdles stemming from a dearth of financial support and limited exposure. Securing financial backing is a daunting task for feminist filmmakers. Traditional funding sources often favour mainstream narratives, relegating feminist projects to the periphery. This imbalance in support perpetuates a cycle

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<sup>13</sup> '10 Bollywood celebs who opened up on the casting couch' (*Mirchi Plus*, 02 October 2022)

<<https://mirchi.in/stories/movies/10-bollywood-celebrities-who-opened-up-on-the-casting-couch/94631061>>

accessed 30 May 2024

<sup>14</sup> Prasad (n 7)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*



wherein these filmmakers struggle to bring their visions to life, resulting in a scarcity of diverse narratives on the silver screen.<sup>16</sup>

There is no country on earth where women make as much as men for the same work, according to the World Economic Forum. It predicts the global gender pay disparity may take up to 170 years to close.<sup>17</sup> Pay disparity is a challenge that stands at the forefront for the female leads in Bollywood. The actress has spoken of such disparity on various occasions. Bollywood star Sonam Kapoor has spoken out against the gender pay gap that exists in the industry, in which male Bollywood stars are typically paid much more than their female counterparts. Kapoor said that while Bollywood is changing, the change isn't quick enough. 'The gender pay gap is humongous. And I don't think that will be narrowing very soon, unfortunately, but the roles are getting meatier for sure,' The Bollywood gender pay gap is something that Kapoor's contemporary Priyanka Chopra Jonas has also spoken out about recently. 'I've never had pay parity in Bollywood,' Chopra Jonas told the BBC. 'I would get paid about 10% of the salary of my male co-actor. The pay gap is large, substantially large. And so many women still deal with that. I'm sure I will too if I worked with a male co-actor now in Bollywood.'<sup>18</sup>

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

If we compare early Hindi cinema with contemporary Hindi cinema, the representation of women has changed drastically. From male-centric films to female-centric films, from traditional notions and roles to progressive narrative, from domestic portrayal to powerful and empowered portrayal, from being in front of the camera to successfully making their place behind the camera, females in Indian cinema have come a long way, but there are certain challenges which still prevails that require attention. The author would like to make certain suggestions –

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Suparna Dutt D'Cunha 'In India, The Gender Pay Gap Extends Even To Bollywood' *Forbes* (Asia, 30 August 2017) <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/suparnadutt/2017/08/30/in-india-the-gender-pay-gap-extends-even-to-bollywood/>> accessed 30 May 2024

<sup>18</sup> Naman Ramachandran, 'Sonam Kapoor Calls Out 'Humongous' Gender Pay Gap in Bollywood, Diversity Tokenism in Western Casting' (*Variety*, 29 June 2023) <<https://variety.com/2023/film/asia/sonam-kapoor-gender-pay-gap-bollywood-1235657778/>> accessed 30 May 2024

1. **Embracing Diversity:** Hindi cinema shall make efforts to promote diversity in all aspects, including socio-economic diversity, reflecting women from different social and economic backgrounds and age diversity by creating roles for older women highlighting their strengths and challenges.
2. **Creating Relatable Characters:** Hindi cinema shall aim at the portrayal of women with multidimensional personalities, highlighting their strength and vulnerability, flaws and ambitions rather than showcasing them as ideal and flawless individuals so the audience could find them relatable.
3. **Highlighting Social Issues:** Hindi cinema has begun to highlight the social issues, but there is need to address the issues in a much more sensitive and authentic way. Issues such as male gazes, domestic violence, marital rape, and mental health shall be advocated for.
4. **Encouraging and Supporting Women Behind the Camera:** As per a 2017 report by the Geena Davis Institute, only one in ten directors in Bollywood are women. Due to the disparity in the number of men, when compared to women in vital off-screen processes such as script-writing, film-making, and direction, female characters in Bollywood have been presented through the eyes of a predominantly male perspective, resulting in the age-old stereotypes and gender biases in films.<sup>19</sup> There is a dire need to encourage and support women behind the camera to bring to the audience a female perspective.
5. **Promoting Equality:** Hindi cinema shall make an attempt to create roles for women that are portrayed on an equal pedestal as men. Men shall be portrayed as supporting women to propagate a message of understanding, supportiveness and empowerment.
6. **Eradicating Unrealistic Beauty Standards:** Beauty, as portrayed by cinema, becomes the benchmark of beauty in society. Thus, eradicating beauty standards is essential to promote inclusive, diverse and liberated cinema. Women of dark complexion should be given equal opportunity based on their acting skills and should be included in mainstream cinema as protagonists.

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<sup>19</sup> Stuti, 'Changing Face of Women's Representation in Hindi Cinema' *Hindu College Gazette* (06 March 2023) <<https://www.hinducollegegazette.com/post/changing-face-of-women-s-representation-in-hindi-cinema#:~:text=As%20per%20a%202017%20report,percent%20received%20by%20male%20actors.>> accessed 31 May 2024

## CONCLUSION

It is a revolution unfolding, breaking the shackles of patriarchal norms and paving the way for inclusive narratives that amplify the voices of women. This feminist movement in Indian cinema is not merely a passing trend but a paradigm shift that is here to stay. Feminist filmmakers in Indian cinema have risen, armed with their cameras as their swords, challenging the conventional narratives that have long relegated women to the sidelines. They are weaving stories that celebrate female agency, resilience, and diversity. These films serve as a mirror to society, reflecting the struggles, triumphs, and aspirations of women, forcing us to confront uncomfortable truths. We witness multidimensional female characters, flawed yet fearless, navigating through complex emotions and challenging societal barriers.<sup>20</sup>

The representation of women has evolved overtime in Indian cinema. From being portrayed in the role of the ideal wife and sacrificial mother to being portrayed in the role of a powerful, empowered and strong woman, the narratives in Hindi cinema have improved to a large extent. Contemporary cinema has gifted us with numerous powerful female characters like Amrita from *Thappad*, Rani from *Queen*, Shashi from *English Vinglish*, Bulbbul from *Bulbbul*, Sulu from *Tumhari Sulu*, Minal from *Pink* and others who played a role as a catalyst for bringing change in the portrayal of a woman in Hindi cinema. These characters act as tools of empowerment and inspiration for the audience through their thought-provoking messages and authentic and realistic storylines. Although Hindi cinema is evolving, still challenges such as harassment, casting couch, pay disparity, typecasting and backlash from society prevail. In order to address the challenges, it is essential to understand these challenges and make efforts to find solutions for them by promoting equal pay, reporting harassment incidents, providing a safe environment, and eradicating the beauty standards and objectification of women.

There is a need for critical engagement and dialogue surrounding the representation of women in Indian cinema. Film criticism, academic research, and media analysis play a vital role in holding the industry accountable and promoting meaningful discussions. Scholars and critics should continue to explore and analyse the portrayal of women in films while also highlighting

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<sup>20</sup> Prasad (n 7)

the achievements and challenges faced by feminist filmmakers. In conclusion, feminism in Indian cinema has come a long way, with films now challenging gender norms, amplifying marginalised voices, and contributing to social change.<sup>21</sup>

The findings of this paper highlight the evolution of the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema with a deep analysis of characters that stand at the forefront as catalysts for change in society. By continuing to explore diverse narratives, empowering women both on and off-screen, and fostering dialogue and critical engagement, Indian cinema can serve as a powerful catalyst for feminist movements and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*