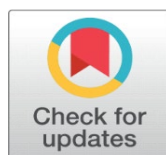


# REEL WOMEN, REAL STEREOTYPES: ANALYSING GENDER REPRESENTATION IN BOLLYWOOD AND MALAYALAM CINEMA

Devi Mohan V. <sup>1</sup>, Dr. Balakrishnan K. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 2020 Integrated English Language & Literature, Amrita School of Arts, Humanities & Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts, Humanities & Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India



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## ABSTRACT

Cinema is a powerful medium through which society is shaped and reshaped. They reflect and reinforce prevailing cultural values. In Indian cinema, the portrayal of women has largely conformed to stereotypes that limit the female protagonist to the role of the devoted mother, the self-sacrificing wife or the object of male desire. In mainstream cinema, Bollywood dominates the discussion, but Malayalam cinemas have also contributed to these portrayals. These portrayals challenge or reinforce stereotypes.

This paper will look at the stereotypical portrayal of women in Indian cinema to see how films create and reinforce gender roles over time. Through the study of common female archetypes, this paper will show how Indian films have often reduced women to objects of male desire, and how Indian films have suppressed women's agency in favor of patriarchal narratives. This paper will also look at how globalization, feminism and changing social attitudes have affected the portrayal of women in cinema today, and will examine how Bollywood and Malayalam films, differ in their portrayals of women. By analyzing Bollywood and Malayalam films, this paper will look at how gender stereotypes differ across languages and cultures.

By critically examining film stories, characters, and industry practices, this study seeks to uncover the historical context, cultural significance, and shifting trends in the representation of women in Indian cinema. And hence, the study contributes to the growing discussion on gender representation in cinema by calling for a more nuanced and various representation of women on screen.

**Keywords:** Bollywood Cinema, Malayalam Cinema, Indian Cinema, Feminism in Cinema, Women in Cinema, Movie Analysis, Common Stereotypes, Patriarchy in Cinema, Female Archetypes, Gender Narratives

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema has always functioned as signifiers of culture, reflecting our standards, beliefs, morals and values. Indian cinema holds huge power over its audiences, as it is one of the world's largest film industries and hence it influences how and what we think about gender roles and what is expected of us. Women in Indian cinema have been reduced to patriarchal narratives, stereotypes and reinforcing rather than challenging them, for ages now. From the submissive wife to the glamorously

objectified heroine and idealized mother, female characters are often written within scripted frameworks that control their agency and depth.

While Bollywood films showcase for most mainstream Indian media, Malayalam cinema have contributed to both the continuation and destruction of these stereotypes. Women portrayed in different cinematic traditions varies according to socio-political and cultural contexts but gender-based stereotypes infuse all cinemas. The Indian movie industry has made some wins and gains in recent years, but it still struggles to create independent and intricate female characters who exist beyond the gaze of men.

This paper studies the stereotypical representation of women in Indian cinema by identifying how they influence perceptions of society on gender and prevalent archetypes. It also looks at how contemporary filmmakers are sabotaging these stereotypes through stronger female protagonists and progressive narratives. By studying the portrayal of women in Malayalam and Bollywood films, this paper tries to understand gender representation in Indian cinema in a wider perspective.

## **2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA**

### **2.1. EARLY WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA (SILENT ERA – 1950S)**

In the early years of Indian cinema, especially during the silent era, filmmakers drew inspiration from folklore, classical literature and mythology. The stories often revolved around traditional values, with women portrayed as symbols of sacrifice, virtue and devotion —reflecting the societal norms of that time. However, due to prevailing social restrictions, women were not encouraged to act in films. As a result, their roles were initially played by men, since acting was not seen as a respectable profession for women.

As sound entered the movies in the 1930s and '40s, more women began to appear in prominent roles, but they still were limited by traditional gender stereotypes. They were usually portrayed as caring mothers, faithful wives, or suffering lovers, reinforcing their association with domesticity and emotional vulnerability. Films such as *Mother India* (1957) solidified the image of the selfless woman as the moral center of the family. While these films celebrated female strength and resilience, they also perpetuated the expectation that a woman's main role was to suffer for the benefit of her family and community.

### **2.2. SHIFT IN FEMALE REPRESENTATION (1960S – 1980S)**

In the 1960s and 1970s, new cinematic styles began to challenge these traditional portrayals. Mainstream Hindi cinema continued to celebrate the romantic heroine, but there was also a rise of more empowered female characters. Nargis, Meena Kumari, and Waheeda Rehman played roles that showed women with emotional complexity, but these women's stories still revolved around love, family, and sacrifice.

With the rise of the “angry young man”—with films like Amitabh Bachchan's films in the 1970s—mainstream cinema began focusing on male-centric stories that pushed women into supporting roles. The heroine became a romantic interest, whose purpose was to facilitate the hero's journey. At the same time, parallel cinema was emerging, with directors like Shyam Benegal and Gulzar making socially conscious films that explored the lives of women. Films like *Ankur* (1974) and *Arth* (1982) featured female protagonists fighting against patriarchy and societal norms, contrasting the formulaic roles in mainstream cinema.

### **2.3. INFLUENCE OF LIBERALIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION (1990S – PRESENT)**

Globalization and economic liberalization in the 1990s changed Indian cinema, both in terms of content and audience expectations. The 1990s brought a major shift in Indian cinema, thanks to globalization and economic liberalization. As India became more connected to the world, Western influences began shaping films in terms of storytelling, visuals, and even how gender roles were portrayed. Bollywood, in particular, started embracing the idea of the “modern independent woman.” Actresses like Kajol, Rani Mukerji, and Preity Zinta played strong, career-driven, and outspoken characters, which felt like a refreshing change. However, despite this progress, many of these roles still revolved around romance, reinforcing the idea that a woman’s ultimate happiness lay in love and marriage.

By the 2000s, Bollywood had started toning down its use of objectification and item numbers in commercial films, though they never disappeared entirely. At the same time, there was a growing effort to tell stories where women had more depth and agency. Films like *Kahaani* (2012), *Queen* (2014), and *Pink* (2016) stood out for showcasing female protagonists who weren’t defined by traditional ideas of femininity. But even with these strides, the industry still wrestles with deep-seated biases, as objectification remains a lingering issue.

In recent years, more women in Indian cinema have begun to find their voices, especially in industries like Malayalam cinema, which has often offered more nuanced portrayals of female characters. Unlike the black-and-white depictions of the “ideal woman” versus the “rebel,” Malayalam films have explored complex and layered representations of women. Meanwhile, Bollywood and other mainstream industries continue to walk a fine line between tradition and modernity, mirroring the broader struggles for gender equality in Indian society.

## **3. COMMON STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN IN INDIAN FILMS**

Indian films have been dependent on persistent female archetypes that echoes societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Though evolving over time, these perpetuate an impact on how women are portrayed on screen. While some representations glorify traditional femininity, others scrutinize norms but often adjust to evolving frameworks of stereotyping.

### **3.1. THE SACRIFICIAL MOTHER**

One of the most perineal and culturally significant narratives in Indian cinema is the suffering mother, the embodiment of resilience, suffering and unconditional. Popularized by films like *Mother India* (1957), *Deewaar* (1975), and *Baghban* (2003), the mother figure is usually presented as a sense of ethics, willing to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of her family and children. She is often an ally of traditional values and is rarely given any form of identity apart from motherhood. While this portrayal recognizes the strength of motherhood, it also limits women to the role of caretaker and reinforces the expectation that a woman’s primary role is to care for and suffer for others.

### **3.2. THE IDEAL WIFE/DUTIFUL DAUGHTER**

Associated with the selfless mother is the dutiful wife and good daughter, a character who is ethical, patient, and devoted to her family, sometimes sacrificing her own desires for the sake of the family. In classics like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), heroines are loyal daughters and wives who desire marriage and a home above everything else. In some cases, they may be educated or have careers, but their ambitions often take a backseat to family responsibilities. These stereotypes perpetuate the idea that a “good” woman is someone who sacrifices her ambitions for her family, thereby reducing the extent to which women have agency in the story.

### **3.3. THE FEMME FATALE / VAMP**

The other woman, meanwhile, is the femme fatale, the vamp—a woman who rebels against social norms and is often manipulative, sexy, or morally corrupt. Unlike the good wife or mother, these women test the boundaries of traditional femininity but are ultimately punished by the narrative. In the heyday of Bollywood, actresses such as Helen popularized the vamp role through glitzy cabaret performances that clearly delineated “good” women from “bad” women. The vamp evolved into the contemporary “other woman” seen in films such as *Aitraaz* (2004) and *Jism* (2003), wherein independent or sexually liberated women are positioned as a threat to the male protagonist’s morality. This dichotomy imposes a strict moral code, which prohibits female characters from expressing autonomy without facing repercussions.

### **3.4. THE GLAMOROUS HEROINE (OBJECTIFICATION & MALE GAZE)**

Bollywood’s emphasis on visual pyrotechnics has made it highly commercial, and female characters are frequently reduced to objects of desire. The heroine’s presence in the film is often defined by her physical attractiveness rather than by her contribution to the story. The popularity of the “item number” in films like *Munni Badnaam Hui* (Dabangg, 2010) and *Sheila Ki Jawani* (Tees Maar Khan, 2010) demonstrates how women’s bodies are used for entertainment. Even in films with substantial roles for female leads, the female characters are often filmed through the male gaze—shot in ways that emphasize beauty over character. This representation makes women objects of desire rather than characters with independent stories, and reaffirms a gender imbalance in storytelling.

### **3.5. THE ‘STRONG’ FEMALE LEAD (BREAKING OR REINFORCING STEREOTYPES?)**

In the last decade or so, we have seen films like *Queen* (2014), *Kahaani* (2012), and *Raazi* (2018), where women take charge and are shown to be strong, intelligent, and resourceful. But even in these more progressive films, there are certain tropes that continue to emerge. Many movies with female leads are still based around trauma, victimhood, or the need for redemption through struggle, suggesting that a woman’s strength comes from being able to overcome pain. Strong female characters are also written in a way that echoes traditionally masculine traits,

suggesting that women are empowered by embracing male-coded behaviours rather than redefining strength on their own terms.

#### **4. BOLLYWOOD AND MALAYALAM CINEMA: A DETAILED ANALYSIS**

In India, the film industry is huge and Bollywood is the most popular and globally recognized wing of the industry. But Malayalam cinema has often been more socially conscious and nuanced in its treatment of gender roles. The contrast between Bollywood's commercialized storytelling and regional cinema's artistic and realistic approach provides valuable insights into how female representation differs across different cinematic traditions.

#### **5. HOW BOLLYWOOD'S COMMERCIAL NATURE INFLUENCES FEMALE REPRESENTATION**

Bollywood's primary concern is the box office, and so it has always shaped its female characters according to mass sensibilities and entertainment value rather than narrative depth. The industry relies on star power, spectacle, and marketability, and so tends to create stereotypical representations of women that fit within conventional gender expectations.

**Formulaic heroines:** Most Bollywood films are about men, and women are often reduced to love interests, victims, or objects of desire. Even if most movies do have strong female leads, their plot tend to focus on romantic subplots or family loyalty rather than personal desires and ambition.

**Item Songs & Objectification** — dance sequences with eroticized female performers have become part of Bollywood's commercial formula. As in *Dabangg* (2010) and *Tees Maar Khan* (2010), these sequences validate the male gaze by emphasizing female bodies as a tool for visual pleasure rather than character development.

**Market Demand for Female Leads** — while female-driven films have become more common in Bollywood, they are advertised as “exceptions and unique” rather than the normal. *Queen* (2014) and *Raazi* (2018) thrive because they're trailblazing films, but mainstream Bollywood remains dominated by males both in production leadership and narrative form.

#### **6. GENDER IN MALAYALAM CINEMA**

Unlike Bollywood, Malayalam cinema, have gained popularity for their more authentic and character layered portrayal of women. Malayalam cinema often take content over commercial feasibility, allowing for complex female characters who challenge stereotypes.

**Realism and Storytelling:** Female characters in Malayalam films often opt for character roles other than just leaning towards romantic or motherly ones. Women's liberation and social norms are probed in films like *How Old Are You?* (2014) without resorting to melodrama or simplistic messages.

**Feisty heroines:** Unlike flashy Bollywood heroines, Malayalam heroines often portrays ordinary women facing everyday challenges. *Uyare* (2019)—about an aspiring pilot who faces challenges—highlights strength, ambition and growth.

**Gender Stereotypes are Challenged:** In Malayalam cinema, for example, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) satirizes the domestic expectations that falls on

women. Such films address social norms more directly than Bollywood films, which are often driven more commercially.

## **7. CASE STUDIES: FILMS THAT CHALLENGE VS. REINFORCE STEREOTYPES**

Analyzing films from Bollywood and Malayalam cinema shows the gender disparity even more obviously.

### **7.2. REINFORCING STEREOTYPES:**

Kabir Singh (2019) – The film romanticizes toxic masculinity and the female lead's submissiveness underscores the major problem of embracing male dominance in mainstream cinema.

Singham (2011) – An action-packed blockbuster, this sidelines its female lead, downgrading her to mere romantic interest and comic relief.

### **7.3. CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES:**

Kahaani (2012) – One of the very few female-driven Bollywood thrillers, in which Vidya Balan's character challenges gender stereotypes by driving the plot and outwitting the system.

The Great Indian Kitchen (2021) – A harsh takedown of patriarchy and domestic labour, this film has some very thought-provoking things to say about gender roles in Indian homes.

## **8. CHANGING TRENDS & CHALLENGES**

Indian cinema has slowly but surely evolved in its portrayal of women, moving away from certain traditional stereotypes to more complex female characters. But while we've seen a hike in the influence of feminist movements and female-driven stories, there are still many challenges within the industry that continue to prevent us from achieving true balance between gender in storytelling—from the gender pay gap to a lack of female filmmakers to systemic biases.

### **8.1. RISE OF FEMALE-CENTRIC FILMS AND STRONG PROTAGONISTS**

In the last few years, we have seen a plausible change in Indian cinema, where there are far more films with female protagonists who are at the helm of the story instead of just being supporting characters.

Women as Protagonists and Not Just Love Interests: Kahaani (2012), Queen (2014), and Raazi (2018) featured women with emotional complexity, agency and ambition—with little to no dependence on men.

Diversity in Themes and Representation: Contemporary films have delved into women-centric issues, such as domestic violence (Thappad, 2020), gender discrimination at work (Tumhari Sulu, 2017), and the search for identity (Queen, 2014). These films dispel the notion that female-driven stories must be romantic comedies or family dramas.

Streaming Services: OTT (over-the-top) streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime have given rise to unconventional female-centric content. Series like



Delhi Crime (2019) and films like Darlings (2022) can explore more complex portrayals of women without the commercial restraints of theatrical releases.

## **8.2. INFLUENCE OF FEMINISM AND GLOBAL MOVEMENTS (E.G., #METOO)**

Global feminism and, especially, the #MeToo movement have had a tremendous influence on the Indian film industry, forcing conversations around gender inequality, harassment and representation.

**#MeToo in Bollywood:** In 2018, several prominent people in Bollywood came under the #MeToo movement, naming and shaming the sexual harassment they faced at the hands of several men in power. This led to greater awareness and accountability in the industry with actors, directors, and production houses standing up against workplace misconduct.

**Empowering women through cinema:** Films like *Pink* (2016) and *Chhapaak* (2020) have addressed feminist issues, challenged patriarchy, and made a stand for gender equality.

**Audience Expectations** Feminist discourse has also affected audience expectations, and there is now greater demand for content that portrays women in empowering and authentic ways. Regressive representations remain prevalent, but there is a growing backlash against misogynistic narratives, particularly among younger, socially conscious viewers.

## **8.3. INDUSTRY OBSTACLES: PAY GAP, FEW FEMALE DIRECTORS, GENDER BIAS IN STORYTELLING**

But while women have made headway, there are still barriers standing in the way of true equality in the film industry.

**The pay gap:** One of the biggest inequalities in Indian films is the pay gap between male and female actors. While male superstars charge huge fees, even lead female actors get paid a fraction of the amount for films of similar scale. While actresses like Deepika Padukone and Kangana Ranaut have spoken out about it, the industry is slow to change.

**Lack of Female Directors and Filmmakers** Women are still largely absent from the creative spaces of directing, screenwriting and cinematography. Zoya Akhtar, Meghna Gulzar and Gauri Shinde are few of the leading directors who have contributed immensely, but the industry is still dominated by male filmmakers and therefore, stories continue to be told from a male-centric perspective.

**Gender Bias in Storytelling:** While female-steered films are more prevalent, many still frame female empowerment as a means to oppress men or gain societal approval. Even stories about strong women are often accompanied by a moralistic tone, reinforcing the idea that female ambition must be earned through struggle or sacrifice.

Indian cinema's presentation of women has changed, but there is still a long way to go before women will be considered truly equal to men in the industry. Though feminist movements and female driven stories across the world have broken free from worn-out motifs, structural problems in the industry continue to limit opportunities for women on and off screen. The future of Indian cinema depends on overcoming these barriers, ensuring that representation of women goes beyond minimal effort representation and reflects the realities and aspirations of contemporary women.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Gender stereotypes, cultural and commercial imperatives have always influenced the representation of women in Indian cinema. From the earliest films, when women were marginalized to the role of sacrifice and virtue, to the present, when female-centric stories are enjoying a rebirth, the industry has come a long way. Yet, even as women's stories have evolved, the scarce range of options for female representation—the sacrificial mother, the perfect wife, or the hypersexualized heroine—has not.

Bollywood has played a dominant role in challenging and reinforcing these gender norms. Mainstream films have been focused on glamor and masculine narratives, but Malayalam cinema has provided more complex and realistic portrayals of women. The growing popularity of female-driven films, the influence of global feminist movements, and the rising backlash against gender bias have contributed in applying a positive approach in storytelling. Nevertheless, the gender pays gap, the lack of female filmmakers, and traditional industry biases continue to pose challenges.

As Indian cinema evolves, filmmakers, audiences and industry stakeholders have a commitment to create more authentic and diverse representations of women. Rejecting archaic stereotypes, exploring and embracing nuanced female characters is not only a step toward gender parity in film but also a reflection of the realities of contemporary India. Progress is not just about increasing the number of women-driven films but also about dismantling the structures that support gendered storytelling. The future of Indian cinema depends on the industry's ability to embrace diversity, challenge conventions and create narratives that empower rather than restrict without focusing just on box office collection.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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