

## Gender Dynamics in Bollywood: A Study of Women Representation

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**Abstract:** *This Paper explores the evolving representation of women in Bollywood cinema, analyzing key shifts from pre-independence era to the present. It examines how Bollywood films have traditionally reinforced patriarchal norms, often depicting women in subservient or objectified roles. However, the paper also highlights a gradual transformation in female representation, influenced by changing societal attitudes and the rise of feminist discourse in India. Focusing on the portrayal of women in different eras, the study delves into the influence of socio-political contexts, film maker's vision and audience reception. It also addresses the growing diversity in Women's characters ranging from empowered protagonists to nuanced complex roles reflecting broader societal changes. By examining both regressive and progressive portrayals, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between Bollywood films, gender norms and cultural identity.*

**Keywords:** Bollywood, Films, Women, Representation, Society, Cinema, Character, Portray

Bollywood, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, is one of the largest and most influential centers of film production globally. With its vast audience, both within India and across the world, Bollywood plays a crucial role in shaping cultural norms, societal values, and public consciousness. The representation of women in Bollywood, India's most prolific and globally recognized film industry, has long been a topic of considerable interest and debate. Bollywood is more than just a source of entertainment; it is a powerful medium that reflects and shapes societal values, attitudes, and beliefs. Through its films, Bollywood plays a pivotal role in constructing and disseminating cultural norms, especially in a country as diverse and complex as India. The way women are portrayed on screen can influence public perceptions of gender roles, aspirations, and identities, making the study of these representations

critically important. This makes the study of women's representation in Bollywood not only a critical area of research but also a lens through which to examine broader societal dynamics. Since its inception, Bollywood has produced films that have mirrored the prevailing societal attitudes toward women. In the early decades, women in Bollywood were often relegated to secondary roles, portrayed primarily as dutiful daughters, self-sacrificing mothers, or loyal wives. These characters were typically defined by their relationships with male protagonists and were seldom shown as individuals with their own desires, ambitions, or identities. This portrayal was a reflection of the broader patriarchal structure of Indian society, where women were expected to conform to traditional roles and expectations. However, as India underwent significant social, economic, and political changes, there was a gradual shift in the way women were represented in Bollywood. The 1970s, for example, saw the emergence of stronger, more independent female characters, although these roles were still limited by societal expectations. Women were beginning to be portrayed as assertive and resilient, often grappling with the challenges posed by a changing society. Despite this, many films continued to reinforce traditional gender norms, depicting women who ultimately returned to conventional roles after a period of rebellion or struggle. The 1990s marked a further evolution in the representation of women in Bollywood. This period witnessed the rise of the 'new woman' – a character who was modern, educated, and often financially independent. Bollywood began to reflect the aspirations of a new generation of Indian women who were increasingly participating in the workforce and asserting their independence. Yet, even as these films showcased empowered women, they often did so within a framework that continued to uphold patriarchal values. The 'new woman' was frequently depicted as balancing her career with her responsibilities at home, embodying an ideal that was both progressive and conservative.

In recent years, there has been a more pronounced shift towards diverse and nuanced portrayals of women in Bollywood. Contemporary films are increasingly exploring themes of female empowerment, agency, and self-determination. Women are now being depicted as complex, multifaceted characters with their own stories, struggles, and triumphs. These films address a wide range of issues, from gender inequality and domestic violence to sexual harassment and the challenges of modern relationships. This shift reflects broader societal changes in India, where conversations around gender equality and women's rights have gained momentum. Despite these advancements, the representation of women in Bollywood remains a contested terrain. While there has been progress in portraying more empowered and diverse female characters, Bollywood continues to grapple with the legacy of its past. Stereotypical portrayals persist, and the industry often prioritizes commercial success over social responsibility. Item numbers, objectification, and the glamorization of traditional gender roles still feature prominently in many films. Additionally,

the industry's reliance on star power and the male-dominated nature of film production mean that stories centered on women often struggle to receive the same attention and investment as those focused on male protagonists. Moreover, the intersection of gender with other social categories such as class, caste, and religion adds further layers of complexity to the representation of women in Bollywood. The experiences and challenges faced by women in India are diverse, and their portrayal on screen is often influenced by these intersecting identities. While some films have begun to explore these intersections, there is still a significant gap in the representation of women from marginalized communities and their unique struggles. The study of women's representation in Bollywood is, therefore, a multifaceted endeavor that requires an examination of not just the content of the films themselves, but also the broader social, economic, and cultural context in which they are produced and consumed. It involves analyzing the ways in which Bollywood both reflects and shapes societal attitudes toward women, and how these representations have evolved in response to changing societal norms and expectations. This research seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender and media by making a critical analysis of the representation of women in Bollywood. The study will also highlight role of film makers and audience reception in shaping the women's representation in Bollywood.

### **Historical Representation of Women in Bollywood**

The representation of women in Bollywood has evolved significantly from its inception in the early 20th century to the present day. This evolution can be divided into two key periods: the pre-independence era, when India was still under British colonial rule, and the post-independence era, after India gained its freedom in 1947. Understanding these periods provides crucial insights into how women's roles in Indian cinema have been shaped by broader socio-political changes and cultural shifts.

The pre-independence period of Indian cinema, spanning from the early 1900s to 1947, was characterized by the portrayal of women in roles that were deeply rooted in traditional Indian values. During this time, the nascent film industry was heavily influenced by the social norms and moral codes of the era. Women were often depicted as paragons of virtue, embodying ideals of purity, devotion, and sacrifice. These portrayals were not merely artistic choices but reflected the broader patriarchal structure of Indian society at the time.<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest examples of female representation in Indian cinema is *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), directed by Dadasaheb Phalke, widely regarded as the father of Indian cinema. In this silent film, women were portrayed through male actors, as it was considered inappropriate for women to act on screen.<sup>2</sup> The female characters in these early films were often passive, submissive figures, who played supporting roles to the male protagonists. Their identities were largely defined by their relationships with men, such as wives, mothers, or

daughters, reinforcing the notion that a woman's primary role was within the domestic sphere. As the industry developed, so did the representation of women, though the changes were gradual. Films like *Devdas* (1935) and *Achhut Kanya* (1936) began to explore the complexities of women's lives and their struggles within a rigid social structure. However, even in these films, women were often depicted as victims of societal norms, unable to break free from the constraints imposed upon them. The characters like Paro in *Devdas* and Kasturi in *Achhut Kanya* are emblematic of this trend. Both characters, despite their strength and resilience, ultimately succumb to societal pressures, reinforcing the tragic fate of women who dared to challenge the status quo.<sup>3</sup>

With India's independence in 1947, the country embarked on a journey of nation-building, and Bollywood played a significant role in this process. The post-independence era saw a shift in the themes explored by filmmakers, with a greater focus on issues of social justice, equality, and modernity. However, the representation of women in Bollywood continued to be shaped by traditional gender roles, even as new narratives began to emerge. In the immediate aftermath of independence, the films of the 1950s and 1960s often depicted women as symbols of the new nation. The character of Radha in *Mother India* (1957), portrayed by Nargis, is one of the most iconic representations of this period. Radha is the embodiment of strength, resilience, and sacrifice, qualities that were seen as essential to the new Indian identity.<sup>4</sup> While *Mother India* is often praised for its portrayal of a strong female character, it also reinforces the traditional role of women as self-sacrificing mothers and caretakers, whose primary duty is to the family and the nation. The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of more complex female characters, though these were often overshadowed by the rise of male-dominated narratives. This period marked the beginning of the 'angry young man' era, epitomized by actors like Amitabh Bachchan. Films such as *Zanjeer* (1973) and *Deewaar* (1975) focused on the struggles of male protagonists against societal injustices, with female characters playing secondary roles. Women in these films were often portrayed as love interests or moral compasses for the male heroes, rather than as independent individuals with their own narratives. However, this period also saw the production of films that challenged traditional gender norms. *Arth* (1982), directed by Mahesh Bhatt, is one such example. The film tells the story of a woman, Pooja, who finds herself after being abandoned by her husband. *Arth* was groundbreaking in its portrayal of a woman who chooses self-respect and independence over societal expectations of marriage and domesticity.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, *Umrao Jaan* (1981), directed by Muzaffar Ali, portrayed the life of a courtesan in a nuanced manner, highlighting her struggles and agency within a patriarchal society.<sup>6</sup> The post-independence era also witnessed the gradual rise of women-centric films, particularly from the 1990s onwards. Economic liberalization in the 1990s brought about significant changes in Indian society, including the roles and expectations of women. Bollywood began to reflect

these changes, with films that explored the lives of modern, independent women. However, these portrayals often oscillated between progressive narratives and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. For example, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) portrays the character of Simran, played by Kajol, as a modern, educated woman who nonetheless adheres to traditional family values. While the film is often celebrated for its progressive portrayal of love and relationships, it also reinforces the idea that a woman's ultimate happiness lies in conforming to societal expectations.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, films like *English Vinglish* (2012) and *Queen* (2013) have pushed the boundaries by depicting women who seek personal fulfillment and independence, challenging the traditional roles assigned to them.

The historical context of women's representation in Bollywood reveals a complex interplay between tradition and modernity. While the pre-independence era was characterized by the portrayal of women in highly traditional roles, the post-independence period saw a gradual shift towards more nuanced and diverse representations. However, even as Bollywood has evolved, the industry continues to grapple with deep-rooted stereotypes and gender biases. The ongoing struggle for more equitable and authentic representation of women in Indian cinema reflects broader societal dynamics and the challenges of reconciling tradition with modernity.

### **Critical Analysis of Gender Representation in Bollywood**

While the industry has evolved over the decades, certain stereotypes and tropes continue to persist, reinforcing traditional gender norms and contributing to the perpetuation of patriarchal values. This section offers a critical analysis of gender representation in Bollywood, focusing on key themes such as stereotypes, objectification, the 'item number' phenomenon, the 'damsel in distress' trope, and the representation of women across socio-economic backgrounds and marginalized communities.

Bollywood has long been criticized for its reliance on gender stereotypes, which often reduce characters to simplistic and one-dimensional portrayals. These stereotypes are deeply rooted in traditional Indian cultural values and have been perpetuated across generations of films. Female characters, in particular, are frequently portrayed in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting their agency and individuality. One of the most pervasive stereotypes in Bollywood is that of the 'ideal woman'—a character who embodies virtues such as purity, self-sacrifice, and devotion to family. This stereotype is often depicted in the form of the dutiful wife, the loving mother, or the chaste lover, whose primary role is to support the male protagonist and uphold the moral fabric of society. Such portrayals reinforce the notion that a woman's worth is intrinsically tied to her ability to fulfill traditional domestic roles.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, women who deviate from these traditional roles are often depicted as immoral or villainous. The 'vamp' character, for instance, is a

recurring stereotype in Bollywood, representing a woman who is sexually liberated, independent, and often manipulative. This dichotomy between the 'good' woman and the 'bad' woman reinforces rigid moral codes and perpetuates the stigmatization of women who challenge societal norms.<sup>9</sup> The impact of these stereotypes extends beyond the screen, influencing societal attitudes towards women and reinforcing patriarchal values. By consistently portraying women in limited and reductive roles, Bollywood contributes to the normalization of gender inequality and the marginalization of women's voices and experiences in both the public and private spheres. Another critical issue in Bollywood's representation of gender is the objectification of women, often through the lens of the 'male gaze.' The concept of the male gaze, popularized by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, refers to the way in which women are depicted in visual media primarily for the pleasure and gratification of a presumed heterosexual male audience.<sup>10</sup> This objectification is evident in the way women's bodies are often sexualized in Bollywood films, reducing them to mere objects of desire. One of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon is the 'item number,' a song-and-dance sequence that is typically unrelated to the film's narrative but serves to titillate the audience with provocative imagery and suggestive choreography. Item numbers often feature female performers dressed in revealing attire, performing sexually suggestive dance moves that cater to the male gaze. These sequences not only objectify women but also reinforce the idea that their primary value lies in their physical appearance and sexual allure.<sup>11</sup> The objectification of women in Bollywood extends beyond item numbers to other aspects of film production, such as cinematography and narrative structure. Female characters are often framed in ways that emphasize their physical attributes, with camera angles and shots designed to highlight their bodies rather than their personalities or emotions. This visual emphasis on women's bodies contributes to their dehumanization and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes. Moreover, the prevalence of the male gaze in Bollywood has broader implications for how women are perceived and treated in society. By consistently portraying women as objects of male desire, Bollywood perpetuates the notion that women's bodies are public property, subject to scrutiny and judgment. This contributes to a culture of objectification and sexualization that undermines women's autonomy and agency.

The 'damsel in distress' trope is another recurring theme in Bollywood, where female characters are portrayed as helpless and in need of rescue by a male hero. This trope reinforces traditional gender roles by positioning men as protectors and women as dependent and vulnerable. The damsel in distress is often a passive character, whose primary function in the narrative is to motivate the male protagonist and serve as a reward for his heroism. This trope is evident in numerous Bollywood films, where the female lead is often kidnapped, threatened, or otherwise placed in danger, only to be saved by the male hero. For example, in the film *Karan Arjun* (1995), the character of Kajol is kidnapped



by the villain and must be rescued by the male protagonists, played by Salman Khan and Shah Rukh Khan. Her role in the narrative is largely passive, with little agency or control over her own fate.<sup>12</sup> The damsel in distress trope not only reinforces traditional gender roles but also diminishes the representation of women as strong, independent individuals. By consistently portraying women as victims in need of rescue, Bollywood perpetuates the notion that women are inherently weaker and less capable than men. This portrayal has broader implications for how women are perceived in society, contributing to the marginalization of women's voices and experiences. Bollywood's portrayal of women is also influenced by their socio-economic backgrounds, with significant differences in the representation of urban and rural women. Urban women in Bollywood films are often depicted as modern, educated, and independent, while rural women are portrayed as traditional, submissive, and confined to the domestic sphere. Urban female characters in Bollywood are frequently shown as career-oriented, fashionable, and assertive. For example, in the film *Aisha* (2010), the titular character, played by Sonam Kapoor, is a wealthy, urban woman who is depicted as confident and in control of her own life. However, even in these portrayals, urban women are often subject to the same stereotypes and objectification as their rural counterparts, with their value frequently tied to their physical appearance and relationships with men.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, rural women in Bollywood are often portrayed as victims of patriarchy and traditional norms, with their roles limited to that of wives, mothers, or daughters. These characters are frequently depicted as oppressed and lacking agency, with little opportunity for personal growth or development. For instance, in the film *Lagaan* (2001), the character of Gauri, played by Gracy Singh, is a traditional village woman who supports the male protagonist but has little agency or narrative arc of her own.<sup>14</sup> The disparity in the representation of urban and rural women in Bollywood reflects broader societal attitudes towards class and gender. By reinforcing the notion that rural women are less empowered and more confined by tradition, Bollywood perpetuates stereotypes that contribute to the marginalization of women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

### **The Role of Filmmakers and Audience Reception**

The representation of gender is significantly influenced by the roles played by filmmakers, including directors, producers, and screenwriters, as well as by audience reception and market dynamics. The interplay between these factors determines the kind of narratives that reach the screen, the portrayal of gender within these narratives, and the subsequent impact on society. This section delves into the influence of key players in the filmmaking process, the existence of gender bias in the industry, the impact of female filmmakers, and how audience reception shapes film content.

Directors, producers, and screenwriters are among the most influential figures

in shaping the content and direction of Bollywood films. Their creative choices, ideological leanings, and personal experiences often dictate the portrayal of gender in cinema. Historically, Bollywood has been dominated by male directors and producers, whose perspectives have largely shaped the industry's output. This male-dominated environment has contributed to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and the marginalization of female narratives. For instance, the 'masala' genre, which combines action, romance, and drama, has been a staple of Bollywood, often featuring hyper-masculine male protagonists and submissive female characters. Directors like Manmohan Desai and Ramesh Sippy, known for their blockbuster films in the 1970s and 1980s, contributed to the popularity of this genre, where female characters often served as love interests or moral compasses for the male leads.<sup>15</sup> The scripts, predominantly written by men, further reinforced these gender roles, offering limited scope for complex female characters. Producers, who are primarily concerned with the commercial viability of films, have also played a crucial role in maintaining gender stereotypes. They often prioritize projects that align with mainstream tastes, which have historically favored male-centric narratives. As a result, films that challenge traditional gender roles or center on female protagonists have struggled to secure funding and widespread distribution. Gender bias in Bollywood is a multifaceted issue that manifests in various aspects of the filmmaking process, from casting and narrative focus to marketing and distribution. This bias is deeply rooted in the industry's history and continues to affect the representation of women both on and off-screen. One of the most glaring examples of gender bias in Bollywood is the disparity in screen time and character development between male and female characters. Female roles are often relegated to secondary or supporting positions, with limited scope for character growth or agency. Male characters, on the other hand, typically dominate the narrative, driving the plot and making key decisions.<sup>16</sup> This imbalance is reflective of broader societal norms, where men are often seen as leaders and decision-makers, while women are expected to play supportive roles. Gender bias also extends to the casting process, where actresses often face ageism and are type casted into roles based on their physical appearance rather than their acting abilities. Older actresses, in particular, struggle to find substantial roles, while their male counterparts continue to play lead roles well into their 50s and 60s. This double standard not only limits the opportunities available to women but also reinforces harmful stereotypes about aging and femininity.

Despite the challenges posed by gender bias, female filmmakers in Bollywood have made significant contributions to the industry, offering alternative narratives and perspectives that challenge traditional gender roles. The rise of female directors, producers, and screenwriters has led to the creation of films that center on women's experiences, explore feminist themes, and address issues of gender inequality. One of the most notable female filmmakers in



Bollywood is Mira Nair, whose work has consistently challenged societal norms and offered nuanced portrayals of female characters. Nair's film *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) is a prime example of how female filmmakers can bring a unique perspective to storytelling, addressing complex issues such as arranged marriages, family dynamics, and sexual abuse, while also celebrating the resilience and agency of women. Similarly, Zoya Akhtar's *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) and *Gully Boy* (2019) have been praised for their authentic and relatable portrayal of both male and female characters, breaking away from traditional gender stereotypes. Female filmmakers have also been instrumental in bringing attention to issues that are often overlooked by mainstream Bollywood, such as sexual violence, gender discrimination, and women's rights. Films like *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), directed by Alankrita Shrivastava, and *Thappad* (2020), directed by Anubhav Sinha (produced by T-Series and Bhushan Kumar), have sparked important conversations about women's autonomy, consent, and the pervasive nature of patriarchy in Indian society. The success of these films has demonstrated that there is an audience for stories that challenge traditional gender norms and offer more complex portrayals of women. However, female filmmakers continue to face significant challenges in the industry, including limited access to funding, distribution, and marketing support. Despite these obstacles, their contributions are slowly but steadily reshaping the landscape of Bollywood and paving the way for more diverse and inclusive storytelling.

The relationship between filmmakers and audiences is a dynamic one, with each influencing the other in significant ways. Audience reception plays a crucial role in shaping the content of Bollywood films, as filmmakers and producers often tailor their projects to align with market demands and audience preferences. However, this relationship is complex, as audience tastes are influenced by cultural norms, societal values, and media representations, which are, in turn, shaped by the films they consume. Traditionally, Bollywood has catered to a conservative audience that favors family-oriented, melodramatic narratives with clear moral messages. This has led to the prevalence of gender stereotypes and traditional portrayals of women in mainstream cinema, as these narratives are perceived to be more commercially viable.<sup>17</sup> However, changing social dynamics and the rise of a more diverse and globalized audience have begun to challenge these norms, creating space for more progressive and varied representations of gender. In recent years, there has been a growing demand for films that offer more realistic and nuanced portrayals of women, driven by a more socially conscious and media-savvy audience. This shift in audience preferences has led to the success of films like *Queen* (2013), *Piku* (2015), and *Pink* (2016), which feature strong female protagonists and challenge traditional gender roles.<sup>18</sup> The success of these films suggests that there is a market for progressive representations of gender in Bollywood, and that audience reception can play a crucial role in driving change within the industry.

### **Current Trends and Emerging Themes in Bollywood**

In recent years, Bollywood has moved towards more realistic portrayals of women, diverging from the traditional, often idealized representations that dominated earlier decades. This shift is characterized by films that present women as multifaceted individuals with complex emotions, ambitions, and challenges. One notable example is *Piku* (2015), directed by Shoojit Sircar, which offers a realistic depiction of a middle-aged woman balancing her career and family responsibilities. The film's portrayal of Piku (played by Deepika Padukone) as a caring daughter and a successful professional reflects a nuanced understanding of contemporary women's lives.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, *Kahaani* (2012), directed by Sujoy Ghosh, features a female protagonist (Vidya Bagchi, played by Vidya Balan) who is both resourceful and resilient, challenging traditional notions of female passivity. These films, among others, represent a broader trend towards authenticity in storytelling. They focus on everyday experiences and challenges faced by women, moving away from stereotypical or idealized portrayals. This shift aligns with a growing demand for stories that reflect real-life complexities and resonate with diverse audiences. There has been an increasing focus on women's issues and stories in Bollywood, with films addressing topics such as gender inequality, sexual harassment, and women's empowerment. This focus reflects a broader societal shift towards acknowledging and addressing gender-related challenges. *Article 15* (2019), directed by Anubhav Sinha, is a prominent example of this trend. The film addresses caste-based discrimination and gender violence, highlighting systemic issues that affect women in rural India. Similarly, *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), directed by Suresh Triveni, portrays a housewife who pursues a career in radio broadcasting, challenging traditional gender roles and expectations.<sup>20</sup> These films not only entertain but also provoke thought and discussion about critical issues. They contribute to a growing dialogue about gender equality and the representation of women's experiences, reflecting a changing attitude towards women's stories in mainstream cinema.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper has explored the evolution of women's representation in Bollywood, examining historical contexts, shifts in portrayals, and critical issues in gender representation. Key findings highlight a complex landscape characterized by both progress and persistent challenges. Historically, Bollywood's portrayal of women has undergone significant transformations. Pre-Independence films often depicted women in traditional roles, emphasizing their domestic duties and moral virtues. Post-Independence, the representation evolved but frequently adhered to conventional gender norms. The 1970s, for instance, saw the rise of male-centered narratives with the 'Angry Young Man' era, leading to a marginalization of women's roles. The subsequent decades

introduced more complex female characters and a gradual shift towards nuanced portrayals. The 1990s brought economic liberalization, which influenced cinematic trends and introduced a duality in women's representations. On one hand, traditional roles persisted; on the other, modern narratives began to emerge, reflecting societal changes and the impact of globalization. The early 2000s and beyond have seen an increasing focus on realistic portrayals of women, with films addressing gender issues such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and female empowerment. Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Persistent stereotypes and gender biases continue to influence film narratives. Traditional tropes like the 'item number' and the 'damsel in distress' still appear frequently, perpetuating outdated views of femininity. Resistance within the industry, coupled with commercial pressures, often hampers progress towards more equitable and diverse representations. The evolution of women's representation in Bollywood has significant implications for both the film industry and societal attitudes. As Bollywood continues to reflect and shape cultural norms, the depiction of women plays a crucial role in influencing public perceptions and promoting gender equality. Realistic and progressive portrayals of women in films can challenge and change societal attitudes towards gender roles. Films that present women as complex, autonomous individuals can foster greater understanding and acceptance of diverse gender identities and experiences. The representation of women in Bollywood is heavily influenced by industry practices, including funding, marketing, and distribution. Encouraging more diverse and inclusive storytelling requires changes in these practices, such as supporting female filmmakers and promoting films with progressive narratives. The growing demand for authentic and empowering portrayals of women reflects changing audience expectations. Filmmakers and producers who cater to these demands can not only achieve commercial success but also contribute to a more equitable and inclusive cinematic landscape.

### Notes and References (Endnotes)

1. Anuradha Dutt, *Women in Early Indian Cinema: The Silent Era and Beyond*, Jaico Publishing House, Mumbai, 2018, p.45
2. Raja Harish Chandra was a seminal film in Indian Cinema, directed by the Dadasaheb Phalke. It was a full length Indian Feature film, marking the beginning of Indian Cinema. The Film was based on a mythological story from the Mahabharata and Puranas, showcasing the tale of king Harish Chandra's truthfulness and sacrifices. It was a silent movie, it used title cards and live music to convey the story and emotions. Due to the societal norms, male actors played female roles including the role of Taramati, the queen. Women were portrayed as being responsible for domestic duties, such as cooking and rearing children. They had limited screen time and dialogue, with men dominating the narrative. Women were expected to confirm to traditional roles and norms, with no deviation or challenge to patriarchal expectations. Gupta Ranjana, *Cinema and Society: Women in*

*Indian Films, 1913-1947*, Orient Black Swan, New Delhi, 2017, p.92

3. Achhut Kanya was a landmark film in the Indian Cinema directed by Franz Osten. The Film features a female protagonist, Kasturi Played by Devika Rani, a strong willed and independent woman. The movie tackles social issues like untouchability, caste-ism and women empowerment, showcasing Kasturi's struggles and triumphs. She is depicted as a woman with agency and autonomy making decisions, taking control of her life, challenging patriarchal traditions, questioning the statuesque and fighting for her rights. Ibid
4. The movie highlights the struggles of a rural women, showcasing her hardships and challenges. Despite facing numerous challenges, she exercises agency and autonomy, making decisions and taking control of her life. Despite this the movie depicts limited scope for women's aspirations, sacrificial motherhood and reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Roa Kavita, *The Evolution of Women's Roles in Indian Cinema: Pre Independence to the 1960s*, University of Hyderabad Press, Hyderabad, 2019, p.73
5. Mera Banerjee, *Tradition and Modernity: Women's Representation in Indian Cinema*, New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 2021, p.62
6. The film showcases the courtesan culture, highlighting the artistic, intellectual and emotional lives of women in this profession. Umroa Jan forms strong bonds with the other women, including her mentor Khanum Jan and her friend Bismillah khan, demonstrating feminine solidarity and support. The film's tragic ending, where Umroa Jan is abandoned and left alone highlights the societal constraints and limitations placed on women, particularly those in the courtesan profession. Ibid
7. The film depicts that women are expected to prioritize marriage and family above personal aspirations. It also expected Female characters to embody modesty and chastity, with their honor and reputation being closely tied to their family's reputation. However, the movie also subtly challenges some of these expectations, particularly through Simran's character development and her ultimate assertion of agency and independence. Reddy Shanta, *Bollywood and the Indian Women: A cultural Study*, McMillan India, Chennai, 2020, p.56
8. Mira Desia, *Gender and Stereotypes in Indian Cinema: A Historical Perspective*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008, p.65
9. Mera Banerjee, *Tradition and Modernity*, p.73
10. Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory as outlined in her 1975 essay visual pleasure and narrative cinema speaks about the male gaze, objectification, stereotyping, narrative control, visual pleasure, identification and desire and patriarchal ideology. Mulvey argues that film can be a tool for social change, but it must change these ideologies. She advocates for alternative narratives, female authorship and critical viewing. Kapur Sunita, *The Male Gaze and Female Representation in Bollywood: A Cultural Critique*, HarperCollins India, Mumbai, 2018, p.87
11. Rajesh Singh, *The Item Number Phenomenon: Sexualization and the Bollywood Dance Sequence*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2020, p. 102

12. The Damsel in Distress trope refers to a narrative convention where a female character is placed in a situation of peril or distress, requiring a male hero to rescue her. This trope often perpetuates gender stereotypes and reinforces patriarchal attitudes. The female character is depicted as weak, passive and unable to escape or solve her problems alone. She is often portrayed as vulnerable, innocent and in need of protection. It has been highly criticized for perpetuating gender stereotypes, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes, limiting female character development and encouraging passive female roles. Meera Patel, *Deconstructing the Damsel: The Evolution of Female Characters in Indian Cinema*, Penguin Random House, Bangalore, 2020, p.49
13. Desia Raina, *Urban Vs Rural: Women in Bollywood's Cinematic Landscape*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2018, p.41
14. Ibid
15. Kiran Chopra, *Directing Bollywood: The Influence of Film Makers on Gender Representation*, Harper Collins, Mumbai, 2019, p.58
16. Priyaa Nair, *Behind the Camera: Gender Bias in Bollywood Film Making*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, p.42
17. Anjali Mehta, *Audience and Representation: A Study of Bollywood's Evolving Narratives*, Rupa Publications, Mumbai, 2019, P.110
18. Both the films offer refreshing and progressive representations of women moving away from traditional Bollywood tropes and stereotypes. In "Piku" Deepika Padukon is depicted as an independent strong willed and confident woman, a successful architect prioritizing her career and personal growth. Piku is unapologetic and outspoken, expressing her opinions and desires without hesitation. In "Queen" Rani (Kangana Ranaut) embarks on a journey of self-discovery, becoming empowered and confident. The film highlights the importance of female friendships and solidarity showcasing Rani's relationship with other women. Patel Kavita, *Bollywood and the Audience: Case Studies of Film Reception*, University of Kolkata Press, Kolkata, 2021, p.115
19. Raina Chatterjee, *Cinema and Society: Changing Trends in Bollywood*, Oxford University Press, Mumbai, 2021, p.47
20. Mera Banerjee, *Tradition and Modernity*, p.8