

Article

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Women in Indian Cinema: Tropes and Some Exceptions



Representation of women in Indian Cinema has been a subject of many academic deliberations. However, the issues of gender are inherently entangled with the problems of class, race and caste in India, caste (Parmar, Pande, & Joshi). Cinema builds narratives through images (that move). These images are captured from different perspectives and subjectivity. Laura Mulvey stated that this subjectivity and perspective can be of three types: one of the camera, one of the audience, and one of the characters on the screen.

Reading Indian film texts is also complex since genre, clearly discernable in films of Hollywood or Europe, is often blurred. Indian film texts also borrow heavily from existing literary and theatre traditions.

The various stereotypical roles that women in Indian cinema are seen are: sacrificing mother, devoting wife, selfless sister, dotting daughter, obedient, innocent, and shy in public. If she works, it is to support her family or someone with superhuman abilities to manage the house and the job

equally. Any diversion to these roles meant she was the vamp. A modern woman aspiring to lead a life of liberty was categorised as a rebel. She was shown onscreen as a modern woman dressed in Western costumes, smoking, drinking, dancing and laughing with men in clubs, ballrooms and theatres. Such portrayals from Neeta (Nargis Dutt) in *Andaz* (1949) to Jazz (Katrina Kaif) in *Namastey London* (2007) are common in popular Indian films; the heroine gets out of touch with Indianness, and the hero brings us back.

Besides the stereotypes, objectification of the female characters is prevalent in Indian cinema as in cinemas across the world. Often, these images are masked with the help of the narrative, like a song and dance sequence or a lengthy scene of the ‘villain trying to outrage the modesty of the heroine’ (Parmar, Pande, & Joshi). Parmar, Pande, & Joshi further write, ‘In a paradoxical situation, women-as-commodities on the screen must become acceptable to women-as-consumers among the audience. Filmmakers have, therefore, skillfully evolved a formula for erotic pleasure that can be communicated without violently breaching the modesty of women. This is accomplished at many different levels – by adding song-dance sequences, including item songs, by valorising a virtuous woman and deprecating a fallen woman and by incorporating long scenes of rape and other forms of violence against women.

The golden-hearted courtesan has been a favourite character type, particularly in Hindi cinema. These characters were a blend of erotic beauty along with innocence and purity of heart. She was the emotional support for the distressed man (Chandramukhi in *Devdas*). Courtesan dancers were these

women of the “other world”, a world that the family woman would never want to see herself in (Nandakumar, 2011). The tragic courtesan falling hopelessly in love with the hero has been the plot of many films.

The vamp was another concoction of Indian cinema that became the receiver of voyeuristic gaze and acted as a counterfoil to the chaste heroine, the admired social model. The vamp is the exact opposite of the Goddess (Mother, Durga, Kali, Lakshmi) that Indian cinema likes to celebrate. The vamp is drunk on a life of lust, alcohol, clubs, dancing, and wears Western clothes, and is also sometimes English-speaking and Western-educated.

Women’s class and caste affected her role in social and family life, though these hardly featured as dominant themes in films. Morality, values, and socio-cultural ethos are defined features of the female characters. Most of these are flat in presentation and do not evolve or grow with the plot or story. The characterisation is mainly in the shades of black and white. They are either good or bad with no go-between. Different shades of personality are rarely explored. Career and ambition in women are carefully omitted from the narrative, some depicting such women as evil (*Abhimaan*, *Judaai*). If a woman works, it is to support her home and family members.

However, there has been the portrayal of women in Indian cinema that goes beyond the stereotypes and formulaic narratives. Let us look at some of the impactful female characters in Indian cinema.



Charulata (Charulata 1964): Satyajit Ray's films stand out in world cinema for the artistry of the mise-en-scene, impeccable narrative, characterisation, and depiction of women. Women in Ray's films are not subsidiary to the narrative; they build the narrative. They are not the bearers of morality; they are complex human beings. Adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's *Nastanir*, *Charulata* is a benchmark when we discuss women in Indian cinema. This is an exciting aspect when the film has only two female characters. The film's first sequence is over nine minutes long and features Charulata with their husband, Bhupati, towards the end. The film credits roll on a long close-up shot of Charulata sewing. As the credits end, the camera zooms out to look at Charulata's mid-shot. This technique is seen many times later in the film. The camera zooming out on a female character can be read as Ray breaking away from the voyeur the female characters are subjected to on screen. Objectification or making a character a subject to look at is often achieved when the camera zooms in. The introductory sequence establishes Charulata. She is a skilled person, the household's mistress, a curious young woman and a lonely wife. As the film progresses, many layers of Charulata are revealed. The first sequence also establishes that Charulata has a voice.

She commands her domestic help to serve tea at the office. Even though the second sequence starts with her sitting beside her husband while he eats dinner, there is no attempt to explore her capacities in household management. We do not see her engaged in any domestic chores. To read *Charulata* only as the tale of a lonely wife who gets into an emotional relationship is an understatement. Charulata wants a companion at par with her intellectual abilities. Thus, her sister-in-law is not the companion she wanted. When Bhupati requests Amal to mentor her, both men underestimate her knowledge and intellect. The irony, however, is that they are ignorant that it is not Charulata who needs mentoring. She inspires Amal to write but forbids him to publish what he writes in the diary she handcrafted for him. Bupati later admits that he could use poetry and fiction rather than political essays. Cinematically, she is always placed on an elevated platform to depict her superiority (intellectual and emotional) in comparison to the two men. Towards the end, Bhupati is distraught to learn about his wife's emotional connection with Amal. But the film ends on a very interesting note, with Charulata welcoming him back. Against the norm, Bhupati bears the guilt of neglect and lack of understanding. The film has an open ending. The gestures hint at a possible reconciliation, but the freeze frames keep us guessing; perhaps there is a journey to make.

Radha (Mother India 1957): Set in post-independence India, still struggling with social and economic impoverishment. It was when socialist ideals and sentiment ruled the mind as the country tried to break free of the colonial and old feudal system.

Radha is introduced in the first sequence of the film. She enters matrimony and leaves her home and village to go and live with her husband. We learn nothing about her except that she is Shamu's wife, Sundar Chachi's daughter-in-law, and Birju and Ramu's mother. She is the ideal woman, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Radha, the selfless but eternal companion of Shamu, reminds the viewers of Lord Krishna's consort, and just like her, she waits for her husband till the end. Radha is the quintessential woman. She works in the field alongside her husband, does all household chores, is a mother to sons, cooks and feeds without worrying about her hunger, and never raises her voice. Radha gives her jewellery to Shamu and tells him to repay the loan, but the self-respecting husband denies it. She is not only conscious of her 'laaj' but also of the women in the village. This puts into perspective the complexities of a patriarchal society where a woman's bodily integrity is intertwined with the sexualisation of her body, and her honour resides in her sexual purity. Radha tells Sukhi Lala that she can give her son but not her 'laaj' and in the end does the same as she kills her son to protect the 'honour' of another woman.



At the same time, Radha is an empowered woman capable of making decisions and guiding her husband. In many scenes, Radha occupies screen space equal to her husband's. She is captured in the dominant views in the two shots when she and Shamu struggle in the field, depicting her stoicism and resilience. When the going gets more challenging, Radha prevails. This is in stark contrast to her soft-spoken nature. Though she does not speak much, she is not naive. She understands more than her husband and mother-in-law about Sukhilala's motive and what is in store. She convinces Shamu to try cultivating in the barren rocky land. After her husband's disappearance, her role as the bona fide head of the family becomes pronounced. Radha brings up her two surviving eldest children, and they have nothing but respect for her. They toil hard on the land and rise from poverty. Radha's resilience in not leaving her land and village paid off. Radha has also earned the respect of the village. Mother India's narrative is also built around the acting prowess of Nargis Dutt to depict the image of a stoic and strong woman who, despite all sufferings and hardships, stands her ground. The allegory of Bharat Mata and her long battle with colonial exploitation is reflected in the character of Radha. The young, glamorous, and popular Nargis Dutta played the mother of actors of her age. Mehboob Khan's ambition to create a larger-than-life narrative of the Indian rural life (women) as a counter to Katherine Mayo's polemical book titled *Mother India*, criticising Indian culture and ethos, came to life with Nargis Dutt's brilliant acting. Mother India is one of the early Hindi films

with a narrative built around and carried forward by the female protagonist.

Mother India is also a seminal text to understand the portrayal of masculinity in films. The film's sole hero is Radha. Its narrative is not carried forward by strong and powerful men. There is no place for using physical force to win over the situation. The only physical power that is glorified is hard labour. The only character that comes near to Radha is her son Birju. The angry, young and violent Birju, though fighting against the apparent injustice, succumbs. Ultimately, Sukhilala, the cunning money lender, bows to Radha and begs forgiveness. This situation again alludes to Radha being an allegorical image of Mother India, plundered and looted by colonial rule. Like the motherland, Radha prevails not by taking arms but by resistance and belief in justice.



Chanda (*Neel Battey Sannata* 2015): *Neel Battey Sannata* is a drama about a mother and her daughter struggling to rise above their socio-economic condition. The only tool that they have is education. Chanda is convinced that her daughter is brilliant and capable of achieving greatness through education. It is this conviction that the film depicts the conflict that she and the teenage daughter must resolve before moving forward.

Chanda is one of the most relatable characters in a popular Hindi film. Again, it is a mother's role but situated in a very different setting. This is modern India and a poor but modern Indian mother who, like Radha, hopes for a better life for her child. Again, hard work here is the key to achieving the desired goal. Chanda is a city dweller working multiple jobs, an urban poor. Like Radha, Chanda is also a single mother and works hard to make sure she can earn enough to provide food and education for her child. The film presents the stress of every modern mother and her child's education. This factor lets Chanda's character cross the boundaries of class, caste, and faith. Chanda's characterisation is flat but essential to drive home the message. She is steadfast and undoubting till the film ends and ensures that her daughter reaches the milestone she is capable of. Humour is often used in the narrative to present essential plot elements like Chanda's struggle with math. Chanda's flat characterisation also helps build the character of Apu, a dynamic character. A teenager, she is prone to the quirks of her age and grows along with the narrative. There is nothing more about Chanda except that she is Apu's mother and household help at Dr Diwan.

The only relationship that the film explores other than Chanda and her daughter is Chanda with her employer, Dr. Diwan, who is her constant guiding force. The lack of other relations in her life delineates Chanda's role as the mother worried about her daughter's future without distractions. Chanda's fight is not with the world; she can gather enough to provide for herself and her daughter with hard work. She struggles to keep her hope alive. In the end, she is able to

win over her daughter, and her dream flourishes. In Chanda, Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari gives us an image of a mother different from the popular depiction. Chanda is the modern Radha in how she hopes for her child but is free from many societal and economic conditions. Chand's dreams empower her daughter.



Rani (Queen 2013): *Queen*, directed by Vikas Bahl, is a coming-of-age comedy about the psychological and moral growth of a girl named Rani. Rani is introduced in the film as a bride-to-be. The opening sequence captures the excitement that grips everyone at a wedding, especially of a girl. Rani, a soft-spoken young girl, is excited, too, and her thoughts are conveyed through her voice-over. Things soon change as her fiancé Vijay conveys that he can no longer marry her as he is a changed man after spending time abroad. Rani is heartbroken and locks herself in the room. She broods over her relationship with Vijay, and we learn that Rani is the typical middle-class Indian girl, a dotting daughter who could never do anything against the rules. Like many, she dreamed of her wedding and is heartbroken. This part of the plot is the premise on which her character is built. As the film progresses, Rani transforms and grows out of her timid self to be a woman with voice and determination. Rani experiences

friendships with different people, especially Vijaylakshmi, the free-spirited hotel employee who exhibits all that Rani is not. In a drunken monologue, Rani summarises her life in Delhi and her relationship with Vijay. Away from the supervision of her elders and the gaze of society, Rani's personality traits start showing.

The film highlights subtle shades of patriarchy besides Vijay's character. At home, Rani is never alone; her brother or a female friend accompanies her. When she starts her journey to Paris, her mother comments that her little brother should have accompanied her. He is her guardian when her parents cannot be around. She closes her bank account before the wedding and tells the clerk she has been dreaming of honeymooning in Paris. Rani is a student of Home Science, again a subject deemed fit for girls. When Rani returns from her journey and visits Vijay, his mother starts making a list of what she wants to do with her daughter-in-law: drink tea, read magazines, and attend kitty parties. Rani, a product of the same system, also displays such prejudices when she advises Vijaylakshmi to refrain from too many casual relationships. However, Rani grows out of this mindset, and when she meets Roxette, a pole dancer, she displays empathy for her.

Vijay pursues her again and tries to persuade her to marry him. She, however, denies it and moves forward. Rani's past and personal and psychological conflicts keep her in restraint throughout the film. Only in the last scene does she and the viewer get fresh air. She gives Vijay back the engagement ring and walks out with a smile. The bright

outdoors, playful background music, and a close-up of the actor complete the film.

The film is a commentary that there is more to a girl's dreams than wedding, marriage and family duties. Rani represents girls trained to live an abiding life and dream of going out into the world but is held back by fear. Carried forward by the powerful acting of Kangana Ranaut, *Queen's* narrative establishes an individual identity without stressing her need for a complete makeover. Rani did not become an opinionated girl because of her trip; the trip helped her express herself without inhibitions. When Vijay had earlier asked her to get his name tattooed, she asked him to do the same. Rani befriends three men, but the film does not explore romantic entanglement here. Instead, she has a casual crush on the Italian chef that does not extend beyond two scenes. The film is about a famous Bollywood entertainer without falling into the trap of a happy ending where the lovers reconcile or a new love comes into her life. It is a happy ending because Rani is happy.



Menaka (Agnisnan 1985): *Agnisnan* is an adaptation of the director Bhabendra Nath Saikia's novel *Antareep*. It is the story of an aristocratic Assamese couple set during

colonial rule. Mohikanta and Menaka are a middle-aged couple with four children living in a joint family consisting of a father-in-law, a mother-in-law and one brother-in-law. Mohikanta is presented as a domineering and overbearing man from the beginning of the film, and Menaka is the sensible woman of the house. Menaka's life takes a sharp turn when Mohikanta falls for a young woman, Kiron and marries her. Menaka feels humiliated and insulted, and Mohikanta's explanation about his capacity to manage money and wealth outrages her. Menaka is shocked at the consequence of her dedication and loyalty towards him and his family and turns vindictive. Menaka's grief, pain, humiliation, and anger at the betrayal are captured through many close-ups. Her position is not where she has a right to make her husband answerable socially and legally. Menaka thus starts distancing herself from her husband and gets intimate with a village outcast, Mandan, and conceives. She lets him know that he is not the master of her body and soul, and if need be, she can cross the threshold just as he did.

Her revenge is the revenge of a woman against a discriminatory patriarchal society that puts the onus of maintaining bodily and moral sanctity on women but leaves men out of it. While everyone is sure that Mohikanta is the child's father, he knows well that he is not and must live the rest of his life with this truth. Menaka tells Mohikanata that to aspire for Sita, one has to be Ram. The film depicts a side of patriarchy that does not necessarily commit physical violence but manifests domination in other forms like denial of space and freedom and subjugation.

Known for breaking stereotypes and portraying strong female characters, Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Agnisnan* gave one of the strongest female characters in Assamese cinema. Menaka emerges as a strong-willed woman who does not seek forgiveness from her husband but shows that she is intelligent and capable of living on her terms. Given her socio-political and economic standing, Menaka took the boldest step.

The female body has always been the bearer of honour- of her family, community, caste and nation. Thus, she must stay 'pure and chaste' to uphold her dignity and those around her. Her body, therefore, is not so much her but belongs to the patriarchal society whose projections and burden she bears. In a society where the bodily sanctity

of women is presented as her honour and honour of family and society, Maneka subverts the idea. She uses it to teach her unfaithful husband a lesson. Maneka's body becomes an instrument for revenge.

Cinema provides an unlimited canvas to paint and create stories. Mass entertainers, experimental films, and art house films cater to different audiences and give out messages (even when some claim it was purely for entertainment's sake). In the vast canvas of cinema, when female characters often get whitewashed by the hero's histrionics, the above-discussed characters and films (though not the only exceptions) have successfully created an alternative narrative about women and their roles.

Works Cited

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