



Gender Politics and Stereotypes in Bollywood Films *Dhrishyam 1 & 2*

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Abstract

Indian cinema is one of the most influential and powerful tools for addressing various social issues via the medium of a screenplay. The Indian film industry, commonly known as Bollywood, is one of the largest and most prolific film industries (Pillania 115) in the world. This article aims to explore Gender Roles and Stereotypes prevalent in Bollywood films, through an in-depth analysis of the popular films *Dhrishyam 1 and 2*, hereafter referred to as the *Dhrishyam* film series. By examining the portrayal of lead characters, the study aims to shed light on the ways in which Indian cinema perpetuates societal norms and biases. Through a combination of qualitative content analysis and audience reception analysis, the research provides empirical evidence to support the claim that Indian films, including the “*Dhrishyam*” film series, contribute to the diffusion of gender stereotyping, consolidating unreasonable societal expectations. With a focus on the intersectionality of gender, identity, and culture, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships between Indian cinema and societal constructs, leading to critical insights into the need for more diverse and inclusive portrayals in the film industry.

Keywords: Gender Roles and Stereotypes, Bollywood Films, *Dhrishyam 1&2*, Societal Expectations; Patriarchy; Feminism

Gender Politics and Stereotypes

Gender Politics and Stereotypes is a critical discourse on equality, representation, differences and societal norms. Gender politics refers to the power dynamics and struggles between different genders in society, while stereotypes encompass widely held but oversimplified ideas about the characteristics or roles of different genders. In the global arena, feminist theories have played a pivotal role in understanding and challenging prevailing gender norms. Prominent feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler have examined the construction of gender identity and its impact on societal structures. Beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex* published in the year 1949 highlighted the ways in which women are often defined in relation to men, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Butler’s concept of performativity emphasizes how gender identity is not inherent but constructed through repeated actions. This challenges the fixed nature of gender roles and opens

up possibilities for more fluid and inclusive identities. On a global scale, the intersectionality of gender with other social categories, such as race and class, adds complexity to the discussion. Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality theory" (46) emphasizes the interconnected nature of various forms of discrimination, underscoring the need for an inclusive approach in addressing gender issues. In addition to theoretical perspectives, global initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advocate for gender equality as a fundamental human right. SDG 5 specifically targets gender equality, aiming to eliminate discrimination, violence, and harmful practices based on gender. Despite these advancements, gender stereotypes persist globally. Media portrayal often reinforces traditional roles, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that limit the potential of individuals and reinforce power imbalances. Addressing these stereotypes requires a multi-faceted approach, involving media literacy, education, and policy changes. In India, the discourse on gender politics and stereotypes is deeply intertwined with the country's rich cultural heritage and complex social structures. Traditional gender roles, shaped by historical, religious, and societal factors, continue to influence perceptions and behaviours. The persistence of patriarchal values has resulted in the perpetuation of stereotypes that confine women to predefined roles within the family and society.

Beauvoir's existentialist perspective challenges the notion of women as the "Other" and explores how women are often defined in relation to men. This conceptualization forms the basis for understanding the construction of gender identity and power dynamics globally. *The Second Sex* speaks of the specific ways that the natural and social sciences and the European literary, social, moral, political and religious traditions have created a world where impossible and conflicting ideals of femininity produce an ideology of women's "natural" inferiority to justify patriarchal domination. Inspired by *L'âge d'homme* written and published by Michel Leiris in 1939, Beauvoir comes up with the question: "What has it meant to me to be a woman?" (94) Beauvoir's immediate reflection disregarded the significance of being a woman, but she soon realized the world around her had always been a masculine one. Beauvoir's liberatory response to women's oppression is a feminism of freedom. She argues against the either/or frame of the woman question (either women and men are equal or they are different). It argues for women's equality, while insisting on the reality of sexual difference. Beauvoir finds it unjust and immoral to use sexual difference as an argument for women's subordination. She insists that women and men must both have the capacity to assume their existence as immanence and transcendence, and therefore must treat each other as equal. What is perhaps the most famous line of *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 330) is credited by many as alerting us to the sex-gender distinction.

Bollywood: Depiction of Women

The interplay between films and society is a fascinating aspect to contemplate, as it raises the question of whether it is the films that shape society or vice versa (Bhugra, 2006). The portrayal of women in cinema has been a major topic of debate in India, with a substantial body of literature exploring various aspects of women in Indian films. From the early days, films drew inspiration from religion and mythology, presenting women as archetypes of virtues and values. Women characters were depicted as incapable of wrongdoing, embodying ideals of loyalty and obedience to their husbands. Owing this, Hindi cinema effectively institutionalized patriarchal values, as seen in films like *Dahej* (1950), *Devi* (1970), *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988), and *Gauri* (1968), where women were portrayed as passive, submissive wives and martyrs for their families. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a growing concern about the representation of women in cinema and their roles in the film industry. Critics argued that women were being patronized, with films depicting victimized wives who endured severe physical and emotional violence but refused to leave their husband's house until death. While films may be made for entertainment, they often have an impact on women's identity and dignity. Owing to these stereotyped representations of women in films, feminists and social activists have raised alarm over the under-representation and misrepresentation of women. However, the extent to which these biases and expectations are a response to societal expectations also needs to be understood. This study is aimed to explore the gender roles and stereotypes in widely popular *Dhrishyam* film series. This investigation holds significant relevance in providing insights into the power dynamics inherent within film narratives and how they shape cultural perceptions and social relationships. Furthermore, it will contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender representation in popular media and provide valuable insights for filmmakers, critics, and audiences alike.

Literature Review

Mehboob Khan's *Aurat* (1940), a modest film, was recreated in colour as *Mother India* (1956) that became an instant success both domestically and internationally due to owing to the representation of popular perceptions of Indian ethos of equating country to mother, and mother being endowed with the milk of kindness prepared sacrifice her life for her progeny. Thus, Indian culture and patriotic pride post India's independence, and the inaugural International Film Festival in Delhi have scripted the success of *Mother India*. It was the immediate post-independence moment that led to the widespread identification of the mother and nation in popular consciousness. It is important to note how since the then era films have added to the nationalist discourse and the construct of the female body as a highly esteemed symbol. It is crucial to ponder upon the implications of women being explicitly invoked by theories of nationhood that witnessed an extraordinary conceptualization and identification of the mother figure and the nation in the collective consciousness of the general public. The use of nation as

a family paradigm places women in a subordinate position that limits her to household, motherly and submissive wife.

Gender construct is generally considered reciprocal to the societal expectations at large. Popular cinema, in particular, has been criticized for perpetuating stereotypical portrayals of gender roles, reinforcing patriarchal norms, and marginalizing female characters. Various studies have highlighted the underrepresentation of female characters (Butalia 107) in Indian films. Research has shown that female characters in Indian films often play secondary or supporting roles (Datta 78), with limited screen time compared to their male counterparts. Studies have indicated a lack of diversity in the portrayal of female characters, with a focus on traditional femininity and beauty standards. Several researchers have examined the prevalence of stereotypical portrayals of women in Indian films (Sibal 4). Common stereotypes include the portrayal of women as passive, submissive, and solely defined by their relationships with men (Acharya 9). Studies have also observed the objectification of women, with a focus on their physical appearance and the objectification of their bodies (Beasley 88). Research has shown that female actors in Indian films face challenges such as ageism and limited career opportunities compared to their male counterparts (Singh 33). Numerous studies have explored how Indian films reinforce traditional gender roles (Chitnis 83). Researchers have found that male characters are often portrayed as powerful, dominant, and breadwinners, while female characters are shown as submissive, nurturing, and dependent on men (Jain 10).

Gender Roles and Stereotypes in *Dhrishyam* film series:

Indian cinema, commonly referred to as Bollywood, has a rich history of portraying women in specific roles and presenting distinct gender dynamics. These portrayals often adhere to traditional gender stereotypes, depicting women as submissive, dependent, and primarily focused on their relationships or their roles as mothers. Such representations not only reinforce patriarchal norms but also perpetuate a limited view of women's capabilities. Gender is the most contentious issue in feminism and postmodern literature. It is a cultural construct of femininity and masculinity and how they ideologically maintain gendered identities. The question at hand is the extent to which gendered representations shape societal outlook and identity. We must consider whether 'identity' is a normative ideal or a descriptive feature of experience. *Dhrishyam* film series (originally produced in Malayalam with remakes in many Indian languages) is an absolutely captivating and the performances by the cast are exceptional. The plot, intricately woven, manages to keep the audience fully engaged from start to finish. For the purpose of this article, the Hindi version of the series is reckoned.

***Dhrishyam 1* (2015): The Murder Mystery**

Vijay Salgaonkar, played by Ajay Devgn, lived happily with his wife Nandini (Shriya Saran) and their two daughters, Anju (Ishita Dutta) and Anu (Mrunal Jadhav). Their peaceful life was shattered when

Sameer Deshmukh (Rishab Chadha), the son of Inspector General Meera Deshmukh (Tabu), filmed Anju while she was showering and blackmailed her for sexual favours. Nandini pleaded with Sameer to delete the video, but he insisted on his demands. Anju tried to stop him and accidentally killed him. Vijay, arriving at the scene, decided to protect his family by burying the body, disposing of evidence, and taking them on a trip. However, their peace was short-lived as they were summoned for questioning by the police. Vijay had prepared for this. Anu, being a child, could not take the police brutality and confessed that her father had buried Sameer's corpse in their backyard. Meera and her entire police team rushed to Vijay's backyard, and the digging began. But instead of Sameer's corpse, they found the decaying carcass of a dog! Vijay then manipulated the public present there by yelling at them that the monster Sub-Inspector Gaitonde had laid hands on his little daughter while forcing them to admit a crime that they hadn't committed. It is well known that the Indian public knows no mercy, whether you be a cop or a criminal! The public pounced on Sub-Inspector Gaitonde, and beat him up black and blue. Finding no evidence against Vijay and his family the case of the missing Sameer was closed, much to Meera's dismay. Vijay and his family walked free.

Dhrishyam 2 (2022): The Murder Case Reopens

The movie *Dhrishyam 2* presents an enthralling plot centred around the character of Vijay Salgaonkar, portrayed by Ajay Devgn. Set in a small town, the story continues from where the first instalment left off, delving deeper into the repercussions of Vijay's actions in order to safeguard his family. The film delves into the aftermath of a crime committed by Vijay's daughter, Anju, and the subsequent investigation conducted by the police. As the pressure intensifies, Vijay must utilize his intelligence and cunning to outsmart a relentless police officer, played by Tabu, who is determined to uncover the truth. *Dhrishyam 2* explores the moral dilemmas faced by Vijay as he navigates through a web of lies and deception to shield his loved ones. The narrative is replete with suspenseful moments, unexpected twists, and turns, effectively keeping the audience on the edge of their seats.

Discussion

The promotional materials, such as posters, clearly depict the Sexual Politics and Stereotypes in the film. Vijay, the master of the house, stands tall as the three female characters - his wife, teenaged daughter, and younger daughter - anxiously peer out from behind him. The poster captured their apprehension, painting a vivid picture of their emotions as they sought solace and protection in the presence of their patriarch. This reminds the audience of the patriarchal nature of Indian society, where men hold positions of power and women face gender-based discrimination. Anju was a victim of Sameer's lust, but both parents feared the judgmental society when it comes to matters of modesty or sexuality. The conflict arose because Sameer recorded Anju while she was bathing during a nature

camping trip, and she would not be considered “acceptable” according to societal standards if the video became public.

Nandini, archetype of a subjugated ‘Indian’ housewife, is depicted solely in relation to other characters, assuming the role of a dutiful wife and mother, diligently tending to her family’s needs and managing household responsibilities. She dutifully adheres to the conventional gender roles assigned to women in Indian society, obediently supporting her husband and deferring to his decisions. Meera's character epitomizes the stereotypical image of an obedient and supportive wife, thereby reflecting the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms prevalent in Indian culture. All the women characters are depicted as insufficient and lacking individuality and self-reliance. Nandini feels vulnerable in the absence of her husband, Meera, despite holding a high-profile responsible role as the IG of Goa police, is overwhelmed by maternal love and emotions, and Geetha, although intelligent and dedicated to her work, is ultimately limited by the narrative. She is portrayed as the antagonist, driven to expose Vijay’s crime, which unfortunately reduces her character to a one-dimensional stereotype and lacks complexity. This portrayal inadvertently reinforces the stereotype that women are guided by emotions rather than logical reasoning. Vijay Salgaonkar is the dominant male figure in the story, responsible for making important decisions and protecting his family. This reinforces traditional gender roles, where men provide and protect while women are seen as dependent and confined to domestic duties. Vijay's love for his family leads him to cross moral boundaries to shield them, showing the pressure society puts on parents. The film explores power dynamics between men and women, highlighting the challenges faced by both genders. Meera, on the other hand, is a strong and independent woman who takes a leadership role in the investigation. However, she faces subtle sexism from male characters who question her competence due to her gender. This underscores the obstacles women face in male-dominated professions.

The investigating team targets Nandini and Anju to elicit information. In a highly stereotypical manner, exploitation of women’s vulnerability by the powerful is projected. The film delves into the complex themes of consent and victim-blaming. The main plot revolves around the incident, an act of violence against women, which subsequently sparks a discussion surrounding the actions and culpability of the victim. This aspect of the film sheds light on society’s proclivity to blame and pass judgment on victims, thereby emphasizing the necessity for conversations centred around consent and respect for personal boundaries. Thus, the female characters in *Dhrishyam* film series are often relegated to supportive roles or confined to stereotypical portrayals within the narrative. Despite the film’s attempt to showcase strong female characters, their agency and depth are undermined, and their primary purpose seems to be advancing the plot or supporting the actions of the male protagonist. This lack of

depth and development for the female characters hampers their potential to make meaningful contributions to the overall narrative of the film.

Analysis

The Dhrishyam films explore the challenges faced by their characters in navigating societal pressures and the consequences of deviating from societal expectations. These issues are relatable to real-life scenarios, forging a strong connection between the fictional narratives and the lived experiences of viewers. However, the representation of women in Indian cinema is often stereotypical and restrictive, reinforcing harmful gender norms. This is partly due to the reluctance of filmmakers to take risks and explore new narratives, resulting in the perpetuation of stereotypes and the limited portrayal of women's experiences. In contrast, male characters are afforded more complex and diverse roles, perpetuating the belief that women are primarily valued for their physical appearance. The predominance of male directors further influences the portrayal of gender dynamics on screen, marginalizing female perspectives and experiences. Commercial considerations and the desire to cater to a predominantly male audience may also play a role in perpetuating these stereotypes. However, it is important to recognize that social expectations also influence the casting decisions and attitudes of filmmakers regarding screen space and role allocation for women in cinema. These expectations are often rooted in deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and societal outlooks that have shaped Indian cinema and its patrons. Consequently, women are often expected to be portrayed in certain ways, such as being overly sexualized or relegated to supporting roles. Gender dynamics are also evident in other facets of filmmaking, as well. Owing to all these existential realities, Indian film industry has become synonymous with a male-dominated space, where women are frequently sidelined and their talent underutilized. The lack of representation and equal opportunities for female actors not only hinders their career growth but also sends a discouraging message to aspiring women in the industry. Appalling and exploitative practices like the issue of casting couch further perpetuates power dynamics and reinforces the notion that women's success is contingent upon compromising their dignity. Though, in recent years, there have been notable changes in the depiction of women in Indian films there is a long way to go to attain equity in all aspects for women. Thus, depiction of women in the selected film series adds to the discourse against perpetuating patriarchy and the tropification of femininity within a dominant cultural context, eroding women's visibility and agency. It also showcases that men's control over legitimating authority further reduces women status and identity.

Conclusion

Literature adapts to societal changes, and films can drive positive transformations by promoting gender equality. They can empower women and challenge stereotypes, addressing social issues like discrimination. Indian films have the potential to bring about social change by fostering dialogue and

advocating for justice. By recognizing the power of films as a medium of cultural expression and a catalyst for social change, the Indian film industry can contribute to a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable society. The *Dhrishyam* film series effectively captures the dynamics of gender and societal expectations in Indian society, hyphenating stereotypes attributed to women, exploring societal pressures. It serves as a catalyst for discussions on gender inequality and societal norms, encouraging viewers to critically examine prevailing dynamics in Indian films. Filmmakers should create diverse and complex female characters, avoiding stereotypes. The film industry should actively challenge gender roles and offer empowering roles for women. It is the responsibility of filmmakers, professionals, and audiences to demand inclusive narratives in Indian cinema. To address these issues, it is crucial to embrace diversity and grant women agency in their own narratives, as cinema has the potential to inspire change and foster a more inclusive society. Further investigation is required to explore the psychological and emotional impacts of Indian films on viewers, the influence of social media in magnifying these effects, and the diverse interpretations and interactions of various audiences with these films.

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