



## From stereotypes to agency: Changing representation of women in post-liberalization Hindi films (1990–present)

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### Abstract

This paper examines the shifting representation of women in Hindi cinema from 1990 to the present, a period shaped by India's post-liberalization socio-economic transformations. While earlier depictions largely confined women to roles of sacrifice, domesticity, and dependence, globalization, media proliferation, and feminist discourse gradually reshaped cinematic portrayals. Through textual analysis of representative films from *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) to *Kahaani* (2012), *Queen* (2014), and *Thappad* (2020), the study traces women's transition from marginal, stereotypical figures to central agents of autonomy and resistance. The findings reveal that although commodification and patriarchal stereotypes persist, contemporary Hindi films increasingly foreground female subjectivity and challenge entrenched gender hierarchies. This research contributes to feminist film studies by situating women's cinematic representation within the broader cultural negotiations of neoliberal India, offering a framework to understand the dialectic between stereotypes and agency in popular culture. This study not only maps the evolution of cinematic representation but also establishes a unique socio-economic lens linking globalization with women's shifting cinematic agency, offering an original contribution to feminist film studies in the Indian context.

**Keywords:** Hindi cinema, women representation, stereotypes, agency, liberalization, feminism, gender in films

### Introduction

The representation of women in Hindi cinema has long served as a mirror of Indian society, reflecting cultural values, social anxieties, and political transitions. Popularly known as Bollywood, Hindi cinema has historically positioned women within patriarchal structures, often portraying them as mothers, wives, or romantic ideals, with limited narrative autonomy. Early depictions frequently mythologized women as embodiments of sacrifice and virtue, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

The economic liberalization of 1991, however, marked a turning point in India's socio-cultural imagination. Globalization, the rise of satellite television, and the emergence of an aspirational urban middle class reshaped both the production and consumption of popular cinema (Rajadhyaksha, 2009) <sup>[16]</sup>. Within this shifting cultural economy, women's roles on screen began to evolve from stereotypical portrayals toward more layered and complex identities. While mainstream films continued to commodify women as glamorous icons, an increasing number of narratives foregrounded female subjectivity, professional ambition, and resistance to patriarchal authority.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on gender in cinema, little attention has been paid to how post-liberalization socio-economic transformations specifically influenced women's cinematic representation. This study addresses this gap by examining how Hindi films since the 1990s negotiate the tension between continuity and change in the portrayal of women. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How have Hindi films, from the postliberalization era to the present, reconfigured women's representation from stereotypes to agency? Unlike earlier studies that focus on isolated decades or individual films, this paper's originality lies in tracing a continuous four-decade trajectory, situating cinematic shifts within India's changing neoliberal cultural economy.

By analyzing selected films across three decades, this paper highlights both the persistence of patriarchal tropes and the emergence of feminist narratives. It situates these shifts within broader cultural and economic transformations, arguing that post-liberalization Hindi cinema functions as a key site where stereotypes and agency are simultaneously contested and reimagined.

**Table 1:** Female Representation Across Decades

Decade	Film	Lead Character	Agency / Constraint	Stereotype Challenged
1990s	<i>Hum Aapke Hain Koun</i> (1994)	Madhuri Dixit	Constrained by familial expectations	Glamour vs traditional femininity
1990s	<i>Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge</i> (1995)	Kajol	Negotiates love within patriarchal norms	Western attire vs sari; constrained modernity
2000s	<i>Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna</i> (2006)	Preity Zinta / Rani Mukerji	Balances career & love	Urban professional women's dilemmas
2000s	<i>Fashion</i> (2008)	Priyanka Chopra	Pursuit of fame & visibility	Commodification of female ambition
2010s	<i>Kahaani</i> (2012)	Vidya Balan	Public agency while pregnant	Challenges mobility & gendered stereotypes
2010s	<i>Queen</i> (2014)	Kangana Ranaut	Solo travel, selfdiscovery	Liberation from patriarchal norms
2010s	<i>Pink</i> (2016)	Taapsee Pannu	Legal empowerment in courtroom	Consent and genderjustice
2020s	<i>Thappad</i> (2020)	Taapsee Pannu	Refuses domestic abuse	Moral & emotional agency
Decade	Film	LeadCharacter	Agency / Constraint	Stereotype Challenged
2020s	<i>Gangubai Kathiawadi</i> (2022)	Alia Bhatt	Transforming victimhood into leadership	Challenges social hierarchy
2020s	<i>Delhi Crime / Made in Heaven</i>	Female leads	Professional authority in public spaces	Contemporary resistance & autonomy

## Literature Review

The study of women in film has been a subject of continuous scholarly interest, particularly as cinema functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text that reflects and constructs gender ideologies. Early feminist film theorists, such as Laura Mulvey (1975) <sup>[14]</sup>, emphasized how mainstream cinema often positions women as passive objects of the "male gaze," reducing them to sites of visual pleasure rather than active narrative agents. Mulvey's seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* has remained a foundational text in film studies, influencing subsequent debates on spectatorship and representation.

Further, Martha Lauzen (2020) <sup>[13]</sup>, through her annual reports on women in film, highlights the persistent gender gap in the global film industry. For example, her research shows that women constitute less than 20% of directors, writers, and producers in Hollywood, illustrating systemic underrepresentation. This scarcity of female voices behind the camera contributes to the stereotypical portrayal of women on-screen.

In the Indian context, scholars such as Shohini Ghosh (2021) <sup>[8]</sup> and Madhu Kishwar (1987) <sup>[10, 11]</sup> have examined the ways Bollywood narratives reinforce patriarchal ideologies while also providing limited spaces for resistance. For instance, Kishwar critiques the romantic glorification of female sacrifice in films like *Mother India* (1957), where the protagonist Radha is celebrated for enduring suffering rather than exercising agency. Similarly, Ghosh argues that mainstream Hindi cinema often places women within a binary framework, either virtuous mothers or modern temptresses, thereby denying them complex subjectivities.

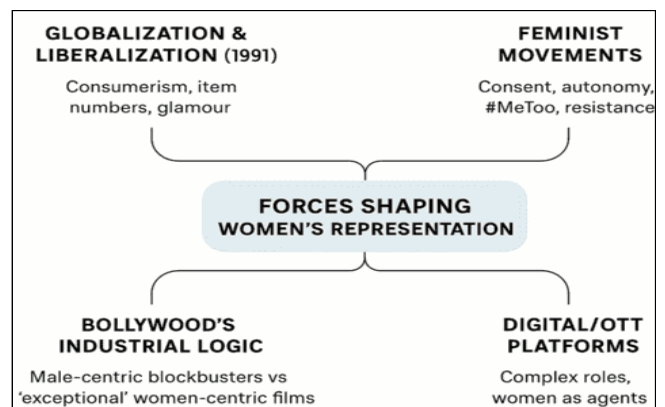
However, contemporary scholarship acknowledges significant shifts in women's representation. Films like *Queen* (2014) and *Thappad* (2020) challenge traditional gender roles by presenting narratives of female autonomy, dignity, and resistance against normalized patriarchy. Scholars such as Rachel Dwyer (2014) <sup>[6]</sup> argue that these films reflect broader sociocultural transformations in Indian society, where urban women are increasingly negotiating independence and selfhood.

Additionally, feminist scholars emphasize the importance of women filmmakers in altering cinematic discourse. The works of Deepa Mehta (*Fire*, 1996; *Water*, 2005) and Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding*, 2001) are often cited as groundbreaking, as they foreground women's desires, struggles, and identities outside patriarchal norms. Their films contribute to what Gayatri Gopinath (2005) <sup>[9]</sup> terms a "queer diasporic aesthetic," expanding the representation of women beyond heteronormative frameworks.

Thus, existing literature provides two main insights: first, the historical marginalization of women in cinema, both on-screen and behind the scenes and second, the emergence of feminist filmmaking and narratives that subvert patriarchal portrayals. This paper builds upon these insights to argue that while mainstream cinema has often perpetuated stereotypes, the rise of women-centric films and female auteurs offers possibilities for resistance and renegotiation of gender roles in cinematic culture. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2022) <sup>[5]</sup> situates Bollywood's gender politics within neoliberal globalization, where media saturation heightens visibility of gender and sexuality. Similarly, recent work by

Chakravarty (2024) <sup>[4]</sup> and Yadav (2025) <sup>[18]</sup> emphasizes how women's cinematic representation is increasingly entangled with digital platforms and feminist mobilizations such as #MeToo, reflecting a more contemporary paradigm of agency. Recent Indian scholarship, including Shoma Chatterji (2019) and Shohini Chaudhuri (2020), further emphasizes the intersections of caste, class, and sexuality in cinematic representation, dimensions this study engages with selectively but acknowledges as critical for future research.

**Research Methodology:** This study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on feminist film theory and socio-cultural analysis to examine the representation of women in post-liberalization Hindi cinema. The methodological framework is structured into three components: sampling, analytical framework, and data sources.



## Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select representative Hindi films released between 1990 and 2023. The films were chosen on the basis of their cultural impact, box-office success, critical reception, and thematic relevance to women's representation. Key examples include *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (2006), *Kahaani* (2012), *Queen* (2014), *Pink* (2016), and *Thappad* (2020), among others. This corpus reflects a diversity of genres—romantic dramas, thrillers, women-centric narratives, and mainstream blockbusters—capturing the evolution of female representation over three decades. While purposive sampling enables focused analysis of culturally significant films, this choice also constitutes a limitation, as it excludes regional cinemas and lesser-known independent productions that might offer alternative gender narratives.

## Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's (1975) <sup>[14]</sup> concept of the male gaze, Judith Butler's (1990) <sup>[2]</sup> theorization of gender performativity, and subsequent scholarship on women in Indian cinema (Kishwar, 1987; Ghosh, 2021; Dwyer, 2014) <sup>[6, 8, 10, 11]</sup>. Narrative structures, character arcs, dialogues, and visual representations are critically examined to assess how women are positioned as either stereotypes or agents of autonomy. Attention is also paid to how socio-economic contexts—liberalization, globalization, consumerism, and feminist movements—influence these portrayals.

**Data Sources**

Primary data consists of the selected films, which serve as cultural texts for content analysis. Secondary data is drawn from scholarly literature, film reviews, box-office reports, and audience reception studies. These sources provide interpretive depth and situate cinematic representations within broader socio-political discourses of gender, economy, and culture in India.

Through this combined approach, the study critically traces the transition of women’s cinematic roles from stereotypical depictions to complex portrayals of agency in the postliberalization era.

**Research Objectives**

1. To analyze how women’s representation in Hindi films has transformed from 1990 to the present.
2. To identify continuities of stereotypes and emergence of agency.
3. To examine the influence of globalization, consumerism, and feminist movements on cinematic narratives.
4. To evaluate whether women-centric films signify structural change or remain tokenistic.

**Analysis**

**Table 2: Decade-wise Shifts in Women’s Representation in Hindi Cinema**

Decade	Dominant Representation (Stereotypes)				Emerging Representation (Agency)
	Women numbers, approval	as glamorous subordinated	add-ons, to patriarchy	item number	
1990s	Dual disc commodity numbers	course: ambitious period via hyper	professional sexualized	s but item	Visible but constrained modernity; women glamorous yet narratively dependent
2000s	Women-centric framed as change	entric films em “exceptional,” li	erge but mited struc	often tural	Women begin navigating career, emotional dissatisfaction, limited autonomy
2010s	Women an OTT era tokenism	s assertive agent bling complex po	s of resist rtrayals be	ance, yond	Central narratives of consent, justice, self-discovery (e.g., Kahaani, Queen, Pink)
2020s					Assertive refusal of patriarchy, nuanced portrayals (e.g., Thappad, Delhi Crime, Made in Heaven)

**The 1990s: Women as Glamorous Add-ons**



**Fig 1:** Madhuri Dixit in Hum Aapke Hain Koun (1994), representing traditional femininity combined with cinematic glamour, reflecting the era’s reinforcement of patriarchal norms



**Fig 2:** Kajol in Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. (1995) juxtaposes Western attire with the sari, symbolizing constrained modernity and negotiation of female agency within familial structures

The decade of the 1990s marked a turning point in the Indian film industry, coinciding with India’s economic liberalization in 1991. Liberalization introduced globalization, the entry of multinational corporations, satellite television, and the expansion of consumerist culture. Bollywood became a crucial site where these socio-economic transformations were reflected and popularized. Cinema, always a mirror of societal aspirations, began to embody the fantasies of a rising middle class. Within this framework, the representation of women in Hindi cinema underwent significant changes, though these changes often

reinforced older patriarchal structures under a new, modernized guise. One of the most notable features of the 1990s was the portrayal of women as glamorous, modern, and consumerist icons, while simultaneously ensuring that they did not transgress traditional patriarchal boundaries. This duality is best represented in the characters played by leading heroines such as Kajol, Karisma Kapoor, Madhuri Dixit, Juhi Chawla, and Raveena Tandon. These actresses frequently played roles that highlighted the conflict between tradition and modernity, a recurring theme in the post-liberalization

cultural landscape.

Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994) embody this conflict. Kajol's character Simran in *DDLJ* represents a young woman raised in a diasporic modern environment, wearing Western clothes and aspiring to travel, yet she remains firmly tied to the patriarchal expectations of her father. Her liberation is ultimately realized not through individual agency, but by securing approval from the male authority figures. Similarly, Madhuri Dixit in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* epitomizes the "ideal Indian woman" who is beautiful, educated, playful, and glamorous, but whose ultimate purpose revolves around family, sacrifice, and the sustenance of patriarchal kinship structures.

Alongside these narrative portrayals, the visual aesthetics of the 1990s increasingly objectified women. The decade saw the rise of the item number phenomenon, where women were positioned as spectacles of desire. Songs such as *Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai* (Khalnayak, 1993) and *Sarkai Lo Khatiya* (Raja Babu, 1994) became cultural flashpoints. These sequences were less about narrative contribution and more about the commodification of female sexuality, catering to the male gaze. Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" can be directly applied here, as women's

bodies were fragmented, stylized, and displayed primarily for male pleasure and audience consumption.

The aesthetics of Bollywood in this era were deeply influenced by the influx of Western media and the advertising industry. Women on screen were dressed in more revealing costumes, presented as fashion-forward, and linked with a new aspirational lifestyle. Yet this newfound glamour was carefully balanced with narratives of domesticity and obedience. For instance, while Karisma Kapoor in *Raja Hindustani* (1996) is shown in glamorous Western attire, her ultimate role is to submit to the will of her husband and integrate into his traditional family values. Thus, the 1990s in Bollywood were characterized by a paradox: women appeared more glamorous, bold, and modern than in previous decades, but this visibility often came at the cost of deeper narrative agency. Women were add-ons to male-centered plots, valued for their beauty, sexuality, and glamour, but confined within patriarchal structures of family, marriage, and male approval. This reflected the cultural anxieties of a society negotiating between globalization-induced modernity and deeply entrenched traditional values.

### The 2000s: Transitional Phase



**Fig 3:** Preity Zinta in *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (2006) depicting urban professional women negotiating love, autonomy, and societal expectations

The decade of the 2000s marked a significant transitional phase in the representation of women in Bollywood cinema. By this time, the forces of globalization, economic liberalization, and the rapid rise of consumer culture had begun reshaping not only the social fabric of India but also its cinematic narratives. The urban middle class, buoyed by aspirations of upward mobility and a global lifestyle, became a key demographic for Bollywood, and consequently, women's portrayals reflected the anxieties and ambitions of this newly visible social group. Films such as *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (2006) brought conversations about women's emotional independence and

marital dissatisfaction into the mainstream. For the first time, mainstream cinema dared to acknowledge that women could question the sanctity of marriage and pursue personal happiness even outside of conventional social boundaries. Similarly, *Fashion* (2008) depicted women navigating professional spaces, ambition, and identity crises in the highly competitive modeling industry, thereby situating female characters within the realm of career-driven narratives rather than confining them to purely domestic roles. These films illustrated the shifting image of the modern Indian woman—educated, ambitious, and increasingly aware of her individuality.



**Fig 4:** Priyanka Chopra in *Fashion* (2008) embodies aspirational modernity and public visibility, highlighting the commodification of female bodies and ambition.

However, the decade was equally characterized by contradictions. The same films that celebrated women's independence also struggled to fully depart from deep-rooted stereotypes. The popularity of hypersexualized item numbers such as *Munni Badnaam Hui* (Dabangg, 2010) and *Sheila Ki Jawani* (Tees Maar Khan, 2010) reinforced the commodification of women's bodies. A close reading of these sequences reveals the use of fragmented camera shots, exaggerated choreography, and suggestive lyrics, underscoring Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' in its most commercialized form, where women's bodies function primarily as visual commodities divorced from narrative logic. These song sequences, often divorced from the central narrative, presented women as spectacles of desire, catering to the male gaze. The rise of the "item girl" as a cultural icon revealed the simultaneous embrace of women's visibility in public spaces and their continued objectification.

Thus, the 2000s can be seen as a liminal period where Bollywood experimented with portraying female agency while still being tethered to patriarchal commercial formulas. This transitional phase highlighted a dual discourse: on one hand, women were increasingly granted narrative space to articulate autonomy, while on the other, their bodies were deployed as instruments of entertainment, signaling the unresolved tension between emancipation and exploitation.

### The 2010s: Women-Centric Narratives

The 2010s marked a visible shift in the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema, with filmmakers increasingly experimenting with narratives that placed women at the center of the story. Unlike earlier decades, where female characters were often confined to supporting roles or portrayed through stereotypical lenses of sacrifice and domesticity, this era introduced women as autonomous individuals driving the narrative forward.

A landmark film of the decade was *Kahaani* (2012), directed by Sujoy Ghosh, where Vidya Balan played the role of a pregnant woman navigating the hostile urban landscape of Kolkata in search of her missing husband. What made *Kahaani* groundbreaking was not only its suspense-driven plot but also its subversion of gender norms: pregnancy, traditionally associated with vulnerability, was here reimagined as a source of strength and determination. Vidya

Bagchi's character challenged the male-dominated thriller genre and demonstrated that women could anchor commercially successful mainstream cinema without a male superstar at the helm.



**Fig 5:** Vidya Balan in *Kahaani* (2012) navigating public spaces while pregnant, challenging gendered stereotypes and asserting female agency in urban landscapes.

Following this, *Queen* (2013), starring Kangana Ranaut, resonated deeply with audiences by narrating the journey of Rani Mehra, a middle-class woman who embarks on a solo honeymoon after her fiancé calls off the wedding. The film celebrated female independence, self-discovery, and the breaking away from patriarchal expectations of marriage as the ultimate goal for women. Importantly, it showed an ordinary woman finding her voice in extraordinary circumstances, thus broadening the spectrum of "relatable" female protagonists in Bollywood.



**Fig 6:** Kangana Ranaut in *Queen* (2014) as a solo traveler in Europe, symbolizing self-discovery and liberation from patriarchal constraints.

Complementing these shifts, the film *Veere Di Wedding* (2018) and similar narratives embody what recent scholarship terms 'new feminist visibilities' (2024) [15], where marriage, desire, and self-fulfillment are renegotiated through postfeminist sensibilities and urban sisterhood. Cinematographically, *Queen* subverts patriarchal framing by employing extended solo shots of Rani in public spaces, visually asserting her independence without male accompaniment, an uncommon aesthetic in mainstream Bollywood of the time.

The feminist discourse in cinema reached another milestone with *Pink* (2016), directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury. Featuring Taapsee Pannu, Kirti Kulhari, and Andrea Tariang

alongside Amitabh Bachchan, the film directly engaged with issues of consent and victimblaming in the context of sexual harassment. By foregrounding the slogan “No means No,” Pink dismantled entrenched notions of morality, character judgment, and women’s autonomy over their bodies. It moved beyond symbolic empowerment to confront real-life socio-legal issues, reflecting the ongoing feminist movements in Indian society and the broader global wave of gender justice debates.



**Fig 7:** Taapsee Pannu in Pink (2016) courtroom scene foregrounds consent and women’s legal empowerment, emphasizing structural inequalities and resistance.

While these films were widely acclaimed and commercially successful, it is important to note that they were often marketed as “exceptional” projects rather than representative of mainstream cinema. Their success signaled the appetite for women-centric storytelling, but the industry at large continued to rely on male-centric blockbusters as its financial backbone. Thus, while the 2010s carved space for feminist narratives in Bollywood, the shift remained partial and selective, highlighting both progress and the limitations of gender representation in contemporary Indian cinema.

### The 2020s: Assertive Agency and Resistance

The decade of the 2020s marks a significant shift in the cinematic representation of women, where narratives increasingly reflect assertive agency, resistance, and negotiation with patriarchal structures. Unlike earlier decades, where female subjectivity was either domesticated within the private sphere or subsumed within larger nationalist and social reformist discourses, contemporary cinema foregrounds women as active agents challenging systemic inequalities, asserting their autonomy, and demanding accountability from patriarchal institutions.

A landmark example is Anubhav Sinha’s *Thappad* (2020), which sparked national debate by questioning the normalization of domestic violence within marital relationships. The film, centering on a seemingly “minor” incident of a slap, critiques how Indian society trivializes women’s suffering and insists on their unconditional endurance for the sake of familial harmony. *Thappad* transcends its immediate narrative by positioning the protagonist’s refusal to “adjust” as a symbolic rejection of deeply embedded patriarchal expectations. Scholars of feminist film theory might read this as a cinematic enactment of everyday resistance, where the smallest acts of refusal destabilize hegemonic power.



**Fig 8:** Taapsee Pannu in *Thappad* (2020) refusing domestic violence, exemplifying moral and emotional agency within patriarchal familial frameworks.

Similarly, Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) reclaims a stigmatized subject—the prostitute—as a figure of power and leadership. The film, based on Hussain Zaidi’s *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*, reconstructs the life of Gangubai as a narrative of survival, resilience, and eventual dominance within the male-dominated spaces of crime and politics. By portraying her as both victim and victor, the film embodies what Judith Butler (1990) [2] calls the paradox of agency: women exercise agency within, rather than outside, patriarchal structures, often by subverting the very norms meant to confine them.



**Fig 9:** Alia Bhatt in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), transforming victimhood into power, challenging social hierarchies and gendered oppression.

The impact of the #MeToo movement in India (2018 onwards) reverberates in this cinematic landscape. As the movement exposed systemic sexual harassment in industries including Bollywood, it paved the way for more nuanced storytelling around consent, workplace dynamics, and women’s voices. As Yadav (2025) [18] argues, these cinematic articulations are not isolated but directly echo feminist street protests and #MeToo activism, making Bollywood a symbolic battleground for gender justice. Contemporary films and series reflect these sociopolitical currents by challenging the culture of silence and foregrounding female narratives that were previously marginalized.

The rise of streaming platforms (Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+ Hotstar) has further catalyzed this transformation by breaking away from the constraints of mainstream box-office formulas. OTT platforms provide a space for experimental, bold, and layered representations of women. For instance, *Delhi Crime* (2019–2022), based on the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, presents women as both victims of

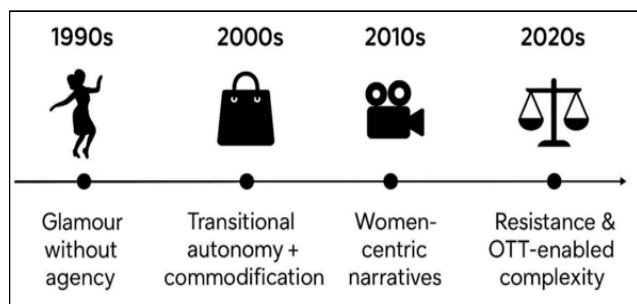
systemic violence and agents of justice, with the female police officer Vartika Chaturvedi (played by Shefali Shah) symbolizing empathetic yet firm law enforcement.



**Fig 10:** Female leads in Delhi Crime (OTT, 2020s) assert professional authority in public spaces, reflecting contemporary narratives of resistance and self-determination.

Similarly, *Made in Heaven* (2019–2023) explores urban Indian women negotiating themes of marriage, sexuality, class, and identity, offering multi-dimensional portrayals where women are not reduced to moral binaries but depicted as complex, flawed, and independent. Chakravarty (2024) [4] highlights that women-centric biopics on digital platforms, such as *Gangubai Kathiawadi* adaptations and emerging OTT releases, have become crucial spaces where female struggles and victories are dramatized for mass audiences, further expanding representational possibilities.

Thus, the 2020s represent an era where cinema and digital media converge with feminist discourses, producing narratives that reflect India’s ongoing struggles with gender justice. Women in these texts are neither passive victims nor one-dimensional “ideal” figures, but active participants in redefining social norms. This shift suggests a deeper cultural negotiation where patriarchal authority is no longer uncontested, and women’s stories are increasingly shaping the very grammar of Indian cinema.



**Discussion**

The trajectory of women’s representation in post-liberalization Hindi cinema reveals a complex interplay of continuity and change, reflecting broader socio-economic transformations in India. While the analysis across decades demonstrates a visible shift from stereotypes to agency, the discussion highlights that this movement is neither linear nor absolute but deeply embedded in contradictions.

First, the 1990s exemplify what feminist film theorists identify as the “commodification of female modernity.” Women were shown as glamorous and independent on the

surface but remained tethered to patriarchal approval and familial duty. This duality echoes Laura Mulvey’s (1975) [14] “male gaze” framework, as women were visually liberated yet narratively constrained. Thus, even as liberalization introduced global consumerist aesthetics into cinema, the female body became a site where tradition and modernity were negotiated, rather than dismantling patriarchal structures.

In the 2000s, a transitional phase emerged where films cautiously experimented with women’s autonomy while simultaneously amplifying objectification through the rise of item numbers. Here, Bollywood reflected a “double discourse”—celebrating career-oriented, emotionally independent women (as seen in *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* and *Fashion*), while simultaneously reinforcing commodification in popular culture (*Munni Badnaam Hui*, *Sheila Ki Jawani*). This aligns with Shohini Ghosh’s (2002) observation that mainstream cinema often offers resistance in fragments while upholding dominant ideologies. Women were no longer confined to the domestic sphere but were rarely allowed to disrupt the male-centered cinematic economy.

By the 2010s, however, a significant rupture became visible. Films like *Kahaani*, *Queen*, and *Pink* placed women at the center, challenging the patriarchal grammar of Bollywood narratives. The language of cinema itself shifted—from women as supplementary characters to women as drivers of the story. Importantly, these films addressed issues like consent, selfdiscovery, and justice, resonating with contemporary feminist movements in India. Yet, the categorization of such projects as “exceptional” underscores the limits of structural change. Mainstream Bollywood continued to rely on male-centric blockbusters, suggesting that female agency in cinema was often permitted as a cultural “experiment” rather than an industry-wide transformation. This underscores an important paradox: while women achieved visibility as central protagonists, their narratives were still marketed as niche or exceptional, reflecting structural gender biases in Bollywood’s industrial logic.

The 2020s mark an intensification of feminist discourse in cinema, bolstered by digital platforms and global movements like #MeToo. Films such as *Thappad* and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* demonstrate a more assertive articulation of female subjectivity, where women resist patriarchal norms not as symbolic gestures but as structural critiques of everyday power relations. OTT platforms further democratized storytelling by enabling multi-dimensional representations of women (*Delhi Crime*, *Made in Heaven*), unbound by box-office compulsions. This reflects a departure from tokenism toward sustained cultural engagement with gender justice. The paradox, however, remains: women’s agency often operates “within” patriarchal structures, reconfiguring rather than abolishing them (Butler, 1990) [2].

Taken together, the discussion suggests that women’s cinematic representation post-1990 is best understood as a dialectic between stereotype and agency, continuity and rupture, commodification and empowerment. Economic liberalization and globalization opened new aesthetic and thematic spaces, but these spaces remain contested and uneven. Cinema, as both a cultural industry and a site of gender politics, continues to oscillate between reproducing patriarchal norms and enabling feminist resistance. As Ghosh (2023) [7] notes, women in Indian streaming content

now negotiate modernity and tradition in ways mainstream cinema alone could not accommodate, suggesting that OTT platforms may carry forward the most sustained feminist interventions in popular culture.

Thus, the post-liberalization era of Hindi cinema does not mark a wholesale emancipation of women's representation, but rather an ongoing cultural negotiation. The persistence of stereotypes alongside emergent narratives of agency underscores that cinematic transformations are inseparable from larger social struggles over gender equality in contemporary India.

### Conclusion

The shifting representation of women in post-liberalization Hindi cinema (1990–present) reflects the deep entanglement of culture, economy, and gender politics in contemporary India. Beginning with the 1990s, women's visibility increased under the influence of globalization and consumerism, yet this visibility often came through the grammar of patriarchal control. Films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* allowed women to appear modern and glamorous, but their narrative agency remained subordinated to male authority and familial approval. In this sense, liberalization reshaped the “look” of women on screen but did not fundamentally reconfigure their narrative roles.

The 2000s marked a transitional phase where Bollywood cautiously introduced narratives of female ambition, emotional dissatisfaction, and professional identity (*Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna*, *Fashion*). However, these progressive moves were offset by the simultaneous rise of hypersexualized item numbers, which commodified women's bodies as spectacles of male pleasure. This paradox illustrated the industry's ambivalence toward gender representation—acknowledging women's autonomy yet exploiting their bodies for commercial gain.

By the 2010s, the emergence of women-centric films (*Kahaani*, *Queen*, *Pink*) indicated a more substantial rupture. For the first time in mainstream Bollywood, women were not only central to the story but also embodied discourses of justice, dignity, and self-discovery. These films challenged entrenched stereotypes and engaged directly with contemporary feminist concerns, such as consent and autonomy. However, their positioning as “exceptional” projects highlighted the limits of structural transformation, as the financial backbone of the industry continued to rely on male-centric blockbusters.

The 2020s, however, represent a watershed moment where feminist discourse in cinema has become more assertive, partly due to the #MeToo movement and the proliferation of OTT platforms. Films like *Thappad* and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* foreground women as active resisters of patriarchal systems, while web series such as *Delhi Crime* and *Made in Heaven* offer layered portrayals of women negotiating identity, power, and justice. Unlike earlier decades, these texts depict women not as mere symbols of virtue or modernity but as complex subjects with agency, flaws, and desires. Importantly, digital platforms have disrupted the boxoffice logic that once confined women's narratives, creating more space for experimentation and feminist storytelling.

Taken together, the historical arc from the 1990s to the 2020s demonstrates that while stereotypes persist, Hindi cinema has increasingly carved out narrative space for

women as autonomous agents. This evolution is not linear or absolute but marked by contradictions and negotiations. Women's cinematic representation continues to oscillate between commodification and empowerment, tradition and modernity, stereotype and agency. What is clear, however, is that contemporary Hindi cinema—especially in the streaming era—cannot easily retreat to the earlier one-dimensional portrayals of women without facing cultural critique and audience resistance.

In conclusion, the post-liberalization era of Hindi cinema should be understood as a site of ongoing cultural struggle rather than completed transformation. The representation of women has shifted from peripheral stereotypes to central figures of agency and resistance, but these gains remain fragile and contested. The future of women's portrayal in Hindi films will likely depend on sustained feminist interventions—both from filmmakers and audiences—and the structural democratization of the industry through greater participation of women behind the camera. As Indian society continues to grapple with issues of gender justice, cinema will remain both a battleground and a barometer, reflecting the tensions and aspirations of a culture in transition. Future research must also explore audience reception, the growing role of female filmmakers, and the impact of OTT platforms as democratizing forces that could potentially redefine gender representation beyond tokenistic inclusion.

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