



Communication and the Construction of Cultural and Social Identity: Shifting Gender Archetypes in Indian Cinema

Ruhi Ruchira, PhD Scholar, St. Xaviers University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Email ID: ruhiruchiradutt@gmail.com

Orchid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4910-7090>

Abstract

Cinema, being a significant component of mass media, occupies a prominent role in India, serving as one of the most influential forms of entertainment. Cinema operates as a powerful medium of communication, shaping and reflecting cultural and social identities while often embodying societal conceptions and stereotypes. The depiction of women in Indian cinema has evolved significantly over the years, significantly influencing society's ideas and attitudes around gender roles and empowerment. In India, cinematic gender archetypes have historically reinforced conventional norms; nevertheless, contemporary cinema is experiencing a transformation in these portrayals. This study tries to analyze how Indian cinema articulates evolving gender identities, overcoming rigid binaries to offer more fluid and diverse portrayals. The study will include a thorough review of the evolution of gender perspectives from the inception of Indian film to the present day. This research will tend to analyze significant films from the past decade to explore how narratives, character development, and visual storytelling influence society's ideas of masculinity, femininity, and queer identities. This study will employ qualitative analysis of both mainstream and independent films to elucidate cinema's function in contesting stereotypes, promoting inclusivity, and shaping public discourse on gender identity in India. It also seeks to explore the intersections of gender with other socioeconomic issues by analyzing the complexities of changing gender portrayals in Indian cinema. This research seeks to enhance the broader discussion on gender and media, highlighting the changing relationship between cinema and identity creation across contemporary India.

Keywords: gender identity, role of queer, inclusivity in gender, communication in cinema, gender binary.

Introduction

Indian cinema has historically played a significant role in defining society's conventions and mirroring cultural identities. Over time, its function in the propagation of ideas and values has evolved from mere entertainment to a crucial component of mass media that educates and shapes public perceptions and significantly influences public attitudes and cultural ideals. The altering gender tropes that have historically dominated Indian films are essential to these changing attitudes (Aarzo & Lal, 2025c). These archetypes, which delineate the roles and traits attributed to men and women, have traditionally conformed to inflexible, conventional frameworks. In recent years, there has been a discernible movement in the representation of gender in Indian cinema, as filmmakers progressively depart from traditional norms to explore more intricate and nuanced depictions of masculinity, femininity, and other identities. This not only promotes broader acceptance of diverse gender expressions but also initiates discussions regarding the constraints of the gender binary (Aarzo & Lal, 2025b). As films evolve and mirror shifting sentiments, they contribute to the formation of a more inclusive, progressive society where individuals can define their identities beyond established gender roles.

Women represent around 48.4% of the entire Indian population, making their portrayal on screen essential in shaping social norms. Historically, Indian cinema has limited its exploration of gender views. Films have consistently been produced from a male perspective. Initially, women were entirely excluded from the sector. Male actors portrayed female characters in the movie. The depiction of women in Indian cinema has seen a significant transformation, evolving from roles reliant on the male protagonist to *heroines* assuming the role of the protagonists themselves. Indian cinema, recognized for its diverse and lively narratives, has traditionally faced challenges with constrained representations of gender and sexuality (Aarzo & Lal, 2025a). Throughout much of its history, Indian cinema has maintained a rigid binary conception of gender-male and female-characterized by distinctly defined roles and relationships, with queer characters either sidelined or completely absent. In recent decades, there has been an increasing movement advocating for inclusivity and the depiction of queer identities in Indian cinema. This transition is essential for conveying cultural identity, contesting conventional norms, and promoting a broader comprehension of gender

and sexuality. Indian cinema serves as a crucial medium for social communication, providing a perspective for the audience to connect with societal issues. The portrayal of gender roles influences individuals' perceptions of gender in reality. The recurrence of gender stereotypes in film perpetuates prevailing societal notions on masculinity, femininity, and the roles individuals are expected to assume according to their gender. Nonetheless, despite these significant changes, Indian cinema continues to grapple with authentically and intricately representing gender fluidity (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026c). Traditional gender roles are still very common in popular movies, showing that there are significant challenges in portraying gender in ways that go beyond just male and female.

Evolution of Early Female Characters

The history of Indian Hindi cinema commenced in the early 20th century and has experienced considerable modifications to emerge as the worldwide renowned industry it is today. The development of early Hindi film is marked by innovation, cultural transformations, and an increasing involvement with Indian social and political matters. This journey, from its modest origins to the pinnacle of Hindi cinema, underscores the artistic and socio-political transformations that influenced the industry. The depiction of women in early Hindi cinema underwent considerable evolution throughout the decades, mirroring societal ideals and shifting narratives within Indian society. Female characters in Hindi cinema have evolved from predominantly passive parts in early films to more intricate and empowered portrayals in subsequent years, reflecting the changing dynamics of gender roles, societal expectations, and cultural standards in India.

Early Indian cinema, commencing with the seminal *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, concentrated on mythological narratives and epics. Throughout the independence movement, films served as a medium to express dissent against British colonialism. Following Independence, movies transitioned to confronting societal challenges, portraying an idealized yet achievable society (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026c). The golden era, extending from the 1950s until the late 1970s, highlighted the lively traditions, connections, and customs of rural India. Films depicted poverty and mirrored relatable lifestyles, enabling spectators to identify with on-screen individuals akin to their own experiences.

Historically, Indian society embraced the notion of bodily cleanliness, as demonstrated by the caste system, which saw Brahmins as pure and other castes as impure. This divide resulted in the designation of specific groups as *untouchables*, necessitating the avoidance of

physical contact to preserve purity. Women encountered a multifaceted imposition of purity and impurity, wherein virginity was venerated, while expressions of sexuality or self-expression were deemed contaminating (Lal & Aarzo, 2026a). Bollywood frequently mirrors societal conventions, depicting the fixation on virginity and purity in its plots and character representations.

The 1957 film *Mother India*, directed by Mehboob, sought to amalgamate socialist principles with traditional heritage. The film commences with Radha, an elderly woman, being requested to open a new canal in her village. The males at the event, attired modestly, view Radha as the community matriarch and insist that she inaugurate the canal. Radha is shown as a model woman—an ardent wife and daughter-in-law, esteemed by her community. Her character appeals to female viewers; however, male viewers perceive her as a familial figure rather than a sexual object. In Prakash Mehra's *Muqaddar ka Sikandar* (1978), the depiction of relationships mirrors society's standards. The protagonist, portrayed by Amitabh Bachchan, interacts with the prostitute Zohrabai while yearning for the daughter of a wealthy man from his youth. The video illustrates a dichotomy—the body is linked to the prostitute, whilst the soul is devoted to the 'mother-wife,' whose purity is seen as the cornerstone of a 'true' family.

Historically, Indian cinema has conformed to strict gender conventions. Female characters were frequently confined to the roles of mothers, wives, or damsels in distress, whilst male characters predominantly occupied storylines as heroic figures or providers (Lal & Aarzo, 2026b). As Indian civilization has progressed, its film representation of gender has also transformed. In recent years, Indian filmmakers have started to investigate more intricate and varied portrayals of gender. Films such as *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta, *Tamal* (2007), *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), and *Badhaai Do* (2022) interrogate traditional gender norms, offering a significant forum for discourse on gender fluidity. Characters that obscure or surpass conventional gender roles are portrayed not merely as aberrations but as integral to the wider human experience. These depictions show the gradual cultural acceptance of a spectrum of gender identities that transcends the binary framework.

The action age of Bollywood films in the 1980s resulted in considerable alterations, reducing the influence and importance of heroines. They were frequently relegated to glamorous positions, performing around trees or shown as victims of violence. The physical appearances of actresses were essential for their success, with a focus on their gym-toned physiques. Sridevi, a prominent actress of her period, was recognized for her physical characteristics, dedicating extensive time to cosmetics and embodying assertive, commanding roles. In films such as *Himmatwala*, she demonstrated combat skills and surpassed her male co-stars. This transition contradicted conventional societal conventions, as exemplified by prominent actresses who preceded it. Monica Motwani noted that, despite transformations, heroines in Hindi cinema continue to grapple with conventions established long ago (Deb et al., 2026). Gradually, they forfeited the space they had established, as heroes assumed prominence, relegating heroines to superficial roles devoid of substantial narrative contributions. As India grew increasingly globalized, Bollywood films deteriorated in this aspect. Although certain directors endeavored to create narratives centered on women's

empowerment, actresses such as Tabu and Vidya Balan had limited opportunities to lead these stories. The film *The Dirty Picture* analyzes how societal expectations often drive gender roles in the film business. Silk (Vidya Balan), first cast in parts that highlight her sexuality, ultimately recognizes that her value is linked to her identity as a sex symbol. Her journey illustrates that gender, and by extension sexuality, is performative-a construct that can be changed and exploited for personal profit. This indicates that gender is not a fixed, immutable identity but rather a construct that can be modified, shaped, and reinterpreted and communicated based on society and individual influences. Silk's character challenges the conventional notion of gender, embracing a more fluid understanding of self-expression and identity. Such chances continued to be limited inside the industry.

In the early period of Indian cinema, gender roles were rigidly delineated. Bollywood films of the 1950s and 1960s distinctly depicted masculinity and femininity. Male characters were shown as providers, protectors, and saviors, whilst female characters were depicted as loving wives or innocent damsels in despair. Iconic films such as *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) and *Mother India* (1957) epitomized these notions. In these films, the woman frequently served as the emotional cornerstone of the family, whilst the guy assumed the character of a determined and assertive figure who ultimately triumphed (Aarzo & Lal, 2026b). The stereotypical nature of these gender roles fostered an environment in which audiences assimilated these stereotypes into their daily lives. Consequently, gender representation in cinema not only entertained but also shaped society's standards, influencing the expectations imposed on men and women in reality.

Over the past two decades, Indian cinema has experienced substantial transformations in the representation of gender. Filmmakers have progressively departed from conventional tropes, favoring more diverse and multidimensional characters. This transition reflects broader societal transformations, encompassing altering gender roles, changing conceptions of sexuality, and heightened awareness of gender fluidity. The increasing impact of global cinema, along with India's evolving societal dynamics, has prompted filmmakers to pursue more progressive and inclusive representations of women.

Sexism and Ideological Progress

The "gender binary" denotes the categorization of gender into two separate classifications-male and female-grounded in biological and physical distinctions. Historically, these gender roles have shaped social structures, expectations, and power relations, with males typically holding positions of authority and women confined to domestic roles. Gender stereotypes are extensive generalizations that attribute specific behaviors, traits, and obligations to persons according to their gender. In Indian cinema, women are frequently characterized as submissive, caring, and emotional, whilst men are depicted as powerful,

authoritative, and rational. Indian cinema has increasingly mirrored this dichotomy and these prejudices, portraying men and women in roles that reinforce traditional gender standards. Women are frequently portrayed as caregivers, mothers, and romantic interests, whereas men are typically seen as heroes, guardians, or providers. These images have been criticized as constraining, perpetuating patriarchal institutions that hinder the social mobility and personal agency of both genders (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026a). When people talk about gender fluidity, they are basically breaking down binary gender norms, which are the ideas that there are only two genders (male and female) and that each has its own set of duties, actions, and expectations. Gender fluidity criticism looks at how a piece of work, whether it be cinema, art, or literature, challenges or breaks down these binary ideas by showing people whose gender identities go beyond or resist traditional boundaries. It is influenced by philosophers like Judith Butler, who say that gender is performative rather than intrinsic. From this perspective, gender is not a static identity but a dynamic performance that evolves over time and varies across circumstances.

Indian cinema's depiction of women is significantly influenced by Hindu mythology, particularly highlighting two important figures: *Sita* and *Radha*. Sita, recognized as the archetypal woman in the *Ramayana*, exemplifies selfless loyalty to her husband, hence promoting the concept of unwavering submission to men. Radha's affection for Lord Krishna exemplifies pure, divine love, although it is contextualized within Krishna's perspective, diminishing her distinct individuality. The notion of family supersedes individual aspirations, indicating that any quest for self is considered disrespectful. Patriarchy is deeply ingrained in Indian culture, influencing societal views that equate women with nature and emotions, whilst males are connected to culture and rationality. The female archetype in Indian cinema has experienced a notable shift. Historically, the female heroine was frequently shown as an emblem of purity and sacrifice, confined to passive, domestic roles. This paradigm was prominently displayed in legendary films such as *Mother India*, where the female character's identity was defined by her self-sacrifice and commitment to her children and husband. In such films, women were frequently relegated to a dichotomous role: either the loving, nurturing mother or the subservient, long-suffering wife.

There is a noticeable shift towards more autonomous, assertive, and complex female characters. Films like *Piku* (2015), *Queen* (2014), and *Tumhari Sulu* (2017) portray women as complex individuals, managing careers, personal ambitions, and relationships based on their own choices. In *Piku*, Deepika Padukone's character exemplifies a modern woman who navigates her career ambitions, personal connections, and caregiving responsibilities while preserving her independence. In *Queen*, Kangana Ranaut's protagonist sets out on a journey of self-discovery following the dissolution of her marriage, proving that women possess the capacity to take control of their lives. The changing portrayal of femininity signifies a broader

cultural shift in which women are increasingly acknowledged as individuals with aspirations, ambitions, and autonomy beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother. Contemporary cinema emphasizes women's autonomy, offering a more empowering viewpoint. The theory of gender fluidity, informed by the contributions of intellectuals like Michel Foucault, feminist theorists, and Judith Butler, asserts that gender is a social construct. Gender is not a natural or biological fact; rather, it constitutes a collection of societal expectations and roles that are acquired and reinforced through language, society, and institutions. Cinema addressing gender fluidity frequently underscores the randomness of these structures and examines the ramifications of challenging or surpassing them. This trend is seen in storylines where characters exhibit fluidity in gender by their behavior, looks, or internal identities, illustrating that gender is not a fixed category.

These depictions manifest as stark dichotomies in films, presenting women as either sacrificing, virtuous spouses or gorgeous, westernized personas, so perpetuating inflexible stereotypes. Recent films endeavored to innovate yet frequently perpetuated clichés. Characters such as Geet in *Jab We Met* challenged conventions yet remained stereotypical. Films such as *Kabir Singh* have normalized violence in romantic relationships. The objectification in songs and rap music has further commodified women, shaping society's beliefs. The portrayal of heroes participating in stalking, taunting, or unwanted touching normalizes and trivializes these behaviors, with heroines frequently reacting favorably. This depiction is unfortunately prevalent, even manifesting in complete musical sections within films.

We perpetuate gender stereotypes by expecting virtuous women to be domestic and subservient, objectifying them both subtly and blatantly, and scrutinizing 'unacceptable' females. Films have normalized male infidelity while condemning women for like behavior. The depiction of daughters-in-law varied from compliant homemakers to defiant individuals. Misogynistic films from the 1980s and 1990s rationalized male infidelity, reinforcing sexist ideologies. Subtle character framing frequently portrays women as instruments for the male protagonist's advancement or self-interest. They are depicted as instruments in a man's quest, evident in films when female characters serve as marriage incentives for professional stability or social elevation, diminishing their autonomy.

The portrayal of 'unacceptable and wicked' women further solidifies gender biases. Women involved in extramarital affairs or socializing with several men are disparaged, although analogous behavior by men is frequently excused or celebrated in societal narratives. Narratives depict male infidelity or affairs as culminating in an emotional reconciliation, in stark contrast to the adverse emotions women endure in such circumstances. In *Silsila*, the male protagonist's infidelities were ostensibly condoned, while the female character, played by Rekha, endured adverse feelings and societal condemnation, highlighting gender double

standards. Depictions of the workplace in films also mirror gender biases. Films frequently portray women engaging in external employment to support their families, subsequently relinquishing their jobs owing to domestic responsibilities.

Daughters-in-law are characterized as either compliant caretakers or defiant figures, while mothers-in-law are shown as the origin of conflict, attributing familial disagreement to women. Although contemporary films such as *Queen* and *Margarita with a Straw* challenged prejudices, their classification as art pictures curtailed their influence. Gender equality was frequently conflated with inappropriate behaviors, compromising the authentic spirit of feminism. Madhur Bhandarkar's films, including *Fashion* and *Heroine*, explore the intricacies of metropolitan women, their career trajectories, fears, and processes of self-discovery. These representations challenge stereotypes by illustrating women as not only doctors, nurses, or teachers but also as art directors, journalists, architects, models, and business magnates. They portray women exercising authority, capable of initiating transformation and confronting male supremacy. *Pink* confronted ingrained biases and critical attitudes regarding women's actions and decisions; in *Thappad*, the female protagonist's experience serves as a catalyst for reinterpreting conventional views on marital partnerships. In *Wake Up Sid*, the female lead is an accomplished writer who tutors the protagonist, fostering his personal development. In *Kahaani*, she embodies an action hero and strategist pursuing vengeance while dismantling a terrorist organization following her husband's demise. Despite significant advancements, Indian cinema continues to grapple with entrenched gender stereotypes. Despite efforts to portray powerful women, they frequently revert to patriarchal frameworks. The entertainment industry perpetuates the objectification and stereotyping of women, influencing cultural perceptions and gender relations. Initiatives to highlight various female roles require greater public acceptance and the elimination of entrenched gender biases. The film *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway* (2023), directed by Ashima Chibber, provides a profound examination of identity in relation to gender fluidity, particularly on the interplay between gender standards and cultural expectations within immigrant groups. *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway* isn't directly about gender fluidity, but it does show identity, gender roles, and the difficulties of being a mother in a different country in a way that is complex and nuanced. This is related to larger discussions about gender identity, roles, and societal expectations in a roundabout way. An individual's gender fluidity frequently suggests a non-binary identity. Despite not directly addressing gender fluidity, *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway* addresses cultural conflict and women's views, contributing to the discourse on rigid gender stereotypes.

This film examines how conservative immigrant women struggle to define themselves in foreign institutions with different gender norms. Debika's fight for custody of her children symbolizes a mother's love and strength despite conventional standards of femininity and

motherhood. Nonconformity in gender roles and self-identity is central to the discussion of transcending gender classifications. In addition to family separation and cultural conflict, the film implicitly shows how societal institutions like the legal and child welfare systems reinforce inflexible gender stereotypes. Debika's struggle to define her motherhood, especially in a new culture, challenges gender norms about "proper" mothers and women. This tale may fit with notions of freedom from binary gender standards that limit people to specific roles. Debika's negotiation of her motherhood and identity shows gender flexibility. Her fight against a cultural institution reflects a larger opposition to conformity, resonating with gender-fluid and non-binary people seeking to define their own identity.

Transformation Through the Costume

During the 1950s, color films achieved financial success, with musical numbers, choreography, and costuming significantly contributing to a film's popularity. This period witnessed the rise of iconic Bollywood performers and actresses such as Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Nutan, Meena Kumari, and Madhubala, among others.

Cinemas have historically disseminated sexism through multiple avenues, reinforcing outdated gender stereotypes. A common approach is the explicit objectification of women, manifested in revealing attire, concentrated imagery of exposed body parts, or suggestive framing in music or visual situations. This underscores the notion of women being simple objects of desire, serving a male perspective. Costumes in Bollywood films significantly contribute to the depiction of characters, their attributes, societal positions, and transformations throughout the narrative. Historically, Western attire portrayed vamps or anti-heroines, but with the increasing non-resident Indian demographic, it has become increasingly accepted. Nonetheless, its representation frequently associates it with non-ideal or non-Indian women, as illustrated by Nisha in *Dil To Pagal Hai*, who is attired in provocative clothing that implies commercialization for the male gaze.

Saris, the emblematic Indian garment, signifies virtue and sensuality, with its draping design representing modest sexuality. Films such as *Mohabbatein* employed saris to represent transformation and emotions, utilizing color coding to denote societal positions and feelings, ranging from modesty to bridal symbolism and grieving. Cholis, frequently donned during imaginative scenes or celebrations, are exemplified in *Mujhse Dosti Karoge!*, where Tina's scarlet choli symbolizes her evolution into a respectable Hindu woman, harmonizing tradition and sensuality. This garment's representation highlights skin exposure while maintaining tradition. The salwaar kameez, which is worn by single women, represents traditional values and morals. It can also mean losing one's innocence or a cultural flaw, as seen in *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag*, where Vaibhavari's clothing changes from traditional to Western, showing how

she has changed in society. The analysis examines character alterations via clothing, seen in *Aaja Nachle*, where Anokhi's transition from tomboy to sophisticated woman signifies societal acceptance. This shift frequently corresponds with conventional patriarchal perspectives, mirroring societal expectations for the suppression of women's wants. Robust female figures such as Dhiya in *Aaja Nachle* are likewise bound to conventional representations, highlighting goddess-like attributes and reliance on male viewpoints. The 1990s witnessed a notable transformation in Bollywood, as the conventional boundaries between the heroine and the vamp became indistinct. Heroines started donning audacious attire and exhibiting suggestive motions reminiscent of the former 'bad girl' image. Critics ascribed this alteration to the impact of globalization and consumerism.

Since the 2000s, there has been a significant increase in the diversity of clothing, as Bollywood films started to mirror the evolving roles of women in society. Costumes serve as a medium for self-expression, embodying individuality and empowerment, as women are no longer restricted to a singular depiction. The heightened worldwide exposure and impact of international fashion on Indian cinema have resulted in a notable evolution of women's attire. Actresses such as Priyanka Chopra, Deepika Padukone, and Kangana Ranaut have demonstrated a combination of high-fashion Western attire and traditional Indian garments. In films such as *Piku* (2015) and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), the women's attire is modern, informal, and comfortable, depicting them as independent, confident, and assertive. The saree, while remaining popular, has undergone reinvention, with actors such as Vidya Balan and Sonam Kapoor reinterpreting the classic garment in contemporary, fashionable styles. In films such as *The Dirty Picture* (2011) and *Padmaavat* (2018), sarees and lehengas are reimagined with contemporary elements, imparting a bolder and more empowered aesthetic, frequently symbolizing strength and independence amidst societal scrutiny. Numerous modern films, including *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), *Queen* (2013), and *Chhapaak* (2020), utilize clothing to emphasize women's empowerment. In *Queen*, Kangana Ranaut's character undergoes a makeover, transitioning from a traditional, conservative outfit to modern, autonomous attire as she discovers herself in an unfamiliar city. Likewise, Vidya Balan's character in *Tumhari Sulu* asserts her sexuality and confidence through her attire, transitioning from conventional to audacious. Recent films have progressively shown women from varied backgrounds, with clothing representing varying body types, regional identities, and social classes. Films such as *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011) and *Bareilly Ki Barfi* (2017) provide insight into regional fashion and modesty, simultaneously emphasizing the growing acceptance of body diversity, as heroines don attire that reflects their individuality rather than adhering to a singular, idealized beauty standard. Numerous Bollywood films craft their clothes to enhance the narrative of dance and elegance. Iconic "item songs" like "Chaiyya Chaiyya" (1998) from *Dil Se* and "Munni Badnam

Hui” (2010) from *Dabangg* depicted ladies in form-fitting, exposing attire, frequently employed to enhance the character's sensuality, highlighting the increasing commercialization of women's appearances in film.

The evolution of women's attire in Indian cinema mirrors the dynamic social, cultural, and political landscape of the nation. The evolution of women's clothes in Bollywood, from traditional sarees to contemporary vibrant and diverse fashion choices, reflects the incorporation of worldwide influences and a wider representation of femininity, uniqueness, and empowerment. Currently, costumes transcend mere aesthetics; they embody a woman's individuality, autonomy, and position within an ever-evolving society. The progression of women's dress in Indian cinema illustrates the transformation of women's roles and their representation and celebration in film.

Queer Representations

Gender fluidity has become a significant subject in the global conversation on identity, especially in cinema, where it profoundly influences and mirrors society's standards. Indian film, with its rich and diverse past, has always shown gender roles in binary terms-male against female, masculine versus feminine. In recent decades, there has been a progressive shift towards greater visibility of gender fluidity. This transition is not merely a question of representation but also a potent instrument for communication and the construction of social identity. Central to the critique of queer representation is queer theory, which seeks to dismantle rigid concepts of gender and sexuality. Prominent theorists such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick contend that gender and sexuality are neither binary nor fixed but rather socially constructed categories that are flexible and performative. In literary or cinematic criticism, this involves examining how cinema either reinforces or challenges conventional gender norms and heteronormative frameworks.

Queer characters in Indian Hindi cinema have evolved from being ignored or depicted as villains and sources of comedic relief. Filmmakers have progressively endeavored to produce more diverse and nuanced representations that encapsulate the intricacies of LGBTQ existence. Although full representation remains insufficient, the evolution of queer characters in Bollywood indicates an increasing knowledge, acceptance, and readiness to delve into LGBTQ+ narratives. The growing prevalence of queer storylines in visual media represents a constructive advancement toward enhanced inclusivity and societal transformation in India.

Teresa De Lauretis underscores that mediums such as cinema actively develop and instill representations of gender, frequently resulting in oppressive and unilateral definitions of gender identity. Mainstream cinema frequently mocks or parodies queer identities, especially

when actors participate in drag performances, emphasizing the derision of non-normative gender expressions. It highlights the focus on heterosexual male portrayals of queer bodies in Indian cinema, overlooking lesbianism and explicitly dismissing homosexual and transgender identities.

The depiction of homosexuality in mainstream Indian cinema has traditionally been constrained and clichéd. Films such as *Badnaam Basti* (1971) and *Fire* (1996) presented insights into homosexual topics but encountered obscurity or controversy owing to cultural opposition. *Fire* examined lesbianism within a traditional family context, employing the metaphor of fire to oppose patriarchal conventions, representing female desire and emancipation. The film addresses sexual repression and the confinement of women within heteronormative marriages. *Dostana* (2008) presented a comic interpretation of homosexuality, employing stereotypes and a heterosexual pretense to examine gay relationships. While it brought the issue to the attention of more people, critics pointed out that it was quickly dealt with and reinforced stereotypes, which limited its impact on real LGBTQ+ representation. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhaan* (2020) pioneered the open discourse on homosexual relationships and marriage, illustrating the challenges faced by a gay couple in confronting familial and cultural homophobia. It reinterprets conventional Indian wedding customs for same-sex couples, indicating a possible transformation of social acceptability. These narratives illuminate society's voyeuristic scrutiny of homosexual intimacy, confronting concerns of privacy and societal encroachment. Films such as *Aligarh* (2015) highlighted the infringement of privacy experienced by a gay professor who was dismissed from his position owing to his sexual orientation. They address the societal stigma around homosexuality, illustrating the challenges of coming out in an intolerant environment. These films and programs signify pivotal milestones in LGBTQ+ representation, igniting discourse and elevating minority narratives. A significant transformation in Indian cinema is the increasing representation of queer characters and the examination of gender fluidity. Although films like *Fire* (1996) and *My Brother... Nikhil* (2005) initiated the advancement of LGBT representation, it is only in the past decade that mainstream cinema has shown gay and non-binary characters with greater depth and complexity. *Badhaai Do* (2022) exemplifies films that depict same-sex relationships with comedy, empathy, and honesty. These films legitimize LGBTQ+ identities and relationships in a manner that is more inclusive and less stigmatized, contesting the entrenched standards of heteronormativity. Furthermore, the growing depiction of transgender characters in films like *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021) is essential in emphasizing gender fluidity and the challenges associated with transitioning in a society that upholds strict gender norms. These videos provide a crucial counter-narrative to binary gender norms and advocate for greater acceptance of varied gender identities.

Although films are beginning to feature LGBTQ characters, there remains a deficiency in the diversity of their representation. The majority of mainstream films predominantly emphasize male same-sex relationships, whereas narratives involving lesbians or transgender individuals remain significantly underrepresented. There is a necessity for enhanced intersectional storytelling that encompasses gender fluidity, transgender identities, and queer characters from varied backgrounds and groups. Queer representation and gender inclusion in Indian cinema are essential components of the continuous cultural progress. Indian filmmakers are progressively examining the varied range of gender identities and sexual orientations, hence fostering a more open and inclusive society. Indian cinema significantly challenges conventional gender stereotypes by depicting the experiences of queer individuals, thereby promoting a more nuanced comprehension of cultural identity and enhancing acceptance for oppressed communities.

Conclusion

Indian cinema possesses substantial cultural importance, reflecting societal standards. The representation of women in Bollywood has significantly evolved, influencing ideas and attitudes around gender roles and empowerment. The paper examined the evolution of gender viewpoints, highlighting the transition from male-centric narratives to the emergence of heroines as important actors. The investigation examined the progression of female characters, including significant films and their societal influence. The study examined the interconnection between gender roles and socioeconomic issues, analyzing the subtleties in the depiction of changing gender representations in Indian cinema. It analyzed the historical, ideological, and perceptual transformations, illustrating cases where cinema has both contested and upheld longstanding prejudices. Despite efforts to portray powerful women, the business remains hindered by entrenched biases, fostering objectification and reinforcing gender norms.

The work analyzed the significance of clothing in Bollywood films, highlighting their role in illustrating character transitions and societal responsibilities. The research elucidates how fashion, from saris representing virtue to Western clothing signifying non-ideal women, reflects society's norms and transformations. An acknowledgment has been made on the depiction of queer identities in Indian cinema, addressing the historically limited and stereotypical portrayals, as well as the recent transitions towards more accurate representations. The study encompasses the intricacies, obstacles, and advancements in depicting gender within a culturally significant medium such as Bollywood.

References:

- Aarzo, & Lal, R. (2025a). Enhancing advertising effectiveness through AIDA, AI, and data visualization integration for business strategies. In M. Muniasamy, A. Naim, & A. Kumar (Eds.), *Data visualization tools for business applications* (pp. 85–102). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-6537-3.ch005>
- Aarzo, & Lal, R. (2025b). Gender equality and household chores in Indian traditional society. *Journal of Mass Media & Management*, 1(1), JMMM03/01/2025. https://massmediajournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/research_3.pdf
- Aarzo, & Lal, R. (2025c). Quality culture in advertising agencies and creativity for campaign effectiveness: Analysis of Six Sigma practices. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12, 101891.
- Aarzo, & Lal, R. (2026a). Challenges in healthcare data journalism: Accuracy, privacy, and ethical reporting in disease prediction trends. In *AI model design and data management for disease prediction* (pp. 299–322). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Aarzo, & Lal, R. (2026b). Designing a teacher training program of AI literacy for K–12 educators. In *Defining an AI-based K-12 education system* (pp. 101–120). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Aarzo, & Lal, R. (2026c). Transforming narrative in advertising media and AI-storytelling for global digital literacy. *Међuaooбpaзoвaнue*, 1(2026), 4–18.
- Barclay, F. P., & Kaifia Ancer Laskar. (2023). *Gender and Popular Visual Culture in India*. Taylor & Francis.
- Bhardwaj, Devender and Dr. Praveen Gautam. *INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT Sociology AND Humanities - irjmsh.com*. (2024). Doi.org. <https://doi.org/10.32804/IRJMSH>, Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. Routledge.
- Dasgupta, S., Sinha, D., & Chakravarti, S. (2011). *Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India*. Sage Publications Pvt. Limited.
- Deb, N., Lal, R., & Gogoi, D. M. (2026). Ethical considerations in the integration of artificial intelligence within K-12 education: Opportunities, challenges, and implications in Indian context. In *Defining an AI-based K-12 education system* (pp. 165–182). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Lal, R. & Aarzo. (2026b). Brand promotion and AI-driven innovation in K-12 educational start-ups. In *Defining an AI-based K-12 education system* (pp. 53–76). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Lal, R., & Aarzo. (2026a). AI-driven sentiment analysis to monitor employee well-being. In *Turning human resource analytics into actionable strategies* (pp. 77–96). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Lal, R., & Aarzo. (2026c). Innovative tools and strategies for issue and crisis management in the digital era. In *Reshaping corporate communication* (pp. 108–130). Routledge.
- Lee, J. W., & Ashcraft, A. M. (2005). *Gender roles*. Nova Biomedical Books.
- Lindsey, L. L. (2015). *GENDER ROLES : a Sociological perspective*. Routledge.
- McNay, L. (1992). *Foucault and feminism : power, gender and the self*. Polity.
- Mukherjee, P. (2021). *The Fluid Frame in Cinema*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Nagoshi, J. L., Nagoshi, C. T., & Stephan/Ie Brzuzny. (2014). *Gender and Sexual Identity : Transcending Feminist and Queer Theory*. Springer New York.
- Naples, N. A. (n.d.). *Companion to women's and gender studies*. N.J.
- Rajinder Kumar Dudrah. (2006). *Bollywood : sociology goes to the movies*. Sage.
- Rini Bhattacharya Mehta. (2011). *Bollywood and globalization : Indian popular cinema, nation, and diaspora*. Anthem Press.
- Sanyal, D. (2021). *Gendered Modernity and Indian Cinema*. Routledge.
- Sanyal, S. (2023). *Gender, Sexuality, and Indian Cinema*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Schaefer, D. J., & Karan, K. (2015). *Bollywood and globalization: the global power of popular Hindi cinema*. Routledge.

