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# ‘The grim reality of Women depicted through the lens of Indian cinema: Analysing Anurag Kashyap’s *That Girl in Yellow Boots*, Shyam Benegal’s *Bhumika* and Anvita Dutt Guptan’s *Qala*’

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**ABSTRACT:** The magnetism of the movies and the glamour and intensity with which it entertains, cinema has become a key medium in reinforcing changes and mindsets. Cinema, standing as one of the largest mediums for the intake of art and literature, has been a part of human culture for over a century now and has significantly contributed to the way we perceive the world around us. However, its usage is not limited just as a medium of entertainment and escape but is a powerful tool for mass communication. It has a profound impact on society, shaping its beliefs, attitudes, and behavior and considers the prevailing social, cultural, and political climate. Its influence on social and cultural trends has shaped society and is now also a tool for political propaganda. This research paper aims to focus on the painful reality of women and their depiction through Indian cinema. Besides this, the paper will also shed light on the ill portrayal of women in cinema and the injustice they face behind and on-screen media. The paper in its ensuing sections will build arguments and such portrayal through the lens of various research analysis and film theories, to depict the reality of women.

**KEYWORDS:** Cinema, Bollywood, *Qala*, *That girl in yellow boots*, *Bhumika*, Male gaze, Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus*,

**CINEMA AND ITS REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN** -Around the globe, the film industry grew exponentially in the early 20th century, with Hollywood becoming the hub for it all. As cinema evolved, it transitioned from fiction and glamour towards a reflection upon the societal changes unfolding around the world. While cinema has the potential to bring about positive change, it can also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce negative attitudes. While films like “*Schindler's List*” brought attention to the Holocaust and its atrocities, “*The Help*” highlighted the issue of racism in America. The power of cinema lies in its ability to capture the imagination of the masses and convey a message that resonates with them. The film industry has used this sense of human emotion and belief structure to influence norms and societal unfolding with films like “*Gandhi*” and “*Milk*” promoting nonviolence and civil rights movements.

The depiction of women in cinema has been a topic of discussion for decades. Women are more than often portrayed as the femme fatale or the damsel in distress. They are often portrayed in subservient roles, with little agency or autonomy. They’ve been the object of male gaze with their bodies being objectified for the pleasure of male viewers. This trend of sexualization and oppression continued into the 20th century, with women being depicted either as virginal, innocent beings, or as sexually seductive objects; all facing their own set of judgements.

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s however, pushed for a change in the way women were depicted in cinema. The demand for women to be portrayed as strong, independent individuals, capable of making their own decisions increased and was thus displayed. With a significant gender pay gap in the film industry, and male actors earning significantly more than their female counterparts, the progress that has been made in recent years still has a long way to go.



HINDI CINEMA AND ITS PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN - Through the lens of art and literature, the Indian film industry is a major point of reference for Indian culture in this century. It has shaped and depicted the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding art form could have covered or achieved. The Hindi film industry has come a long way since its inception in the early 20th century and has evolved into a dynamic and diverse industry.

The history of Hindi cinema can be traced back to 1913 with the premiere of Dadasaheb Phalke's 'Raja Harishchandra'. In recent years, Indian cinema has undergone phases of evolution, with a growing emphasis on content-driven cinema leading to the emergence of films that tackle social issues and reflect the changing realities of Indian society. With such a vast growth in cinema across the world, the issues of media, identity and gender become a focal point. While cinema has been an integrated medium to foster creativity and encourage people to move towards a better society, the history of cinema is marked by a lack of representation and diversity.

The bitter reality stands on the grounds of selling sex in the disguise of feminine attributes for the sake of scopophilia, where women are not treated as human beings but as objects used for sexual gratification. Therefore, it's a common perception that the sexual objectification of the female body reflects the cruel reality of the patriarchal world where the worth of a woman depends upon her appearance and sexual functioning.

BLEAK EXISTENCE OF WOMEN – A REAL PORTRAYAL THROUGH INDIAN FILMS - In the attempt at examining the relationship between women and Indian cinema, the exploration has been limited to mainstream media because of its widespread influence over people who enjoy its mass appeal. With such a dynamic representation of life, interest in films taken by feminists stems from concern about the under-representation and misrepresentation of women in cinema. More than often, female characters are portrayed in roles where they have limited access to showcase their ability in diverse roles. With such a portrayal, objectification becomes a constant reality.

This section of the paper focuses on specific Indian cinematic productions from different sections and genres, that shed light on this bitter reality of women despite their unconventional charisma and enigmatic persona.

**That Girl in Yellow Boots:** Anurag Kashyap's 2010 film 'That Girl in Yellow Boots' portrays this complex and layered representation of women, highlighting their struggles and agency in a patriarchal society. It is an *Indian independent, thriller* film with Kalki Koechlin as its lead, unfolding the tale of Ruth, a young British woman who in search of her estranged father visits Mumbai where she takes up work as a masseuse in a seedy massage parlor to make ends meet. In desperate search of her father, Ruth is put face to face with the harsh reality of life lived by women in the city.

Whether it's the fascination with her white skin, fetishizing her broken Hindi or drawn to the muscle rippling beneath her bra strap, Ruth's harassment at the hands of her clients, and her boss' complicity in the harassment, forces her to endure the abuse to keep her job. Besides the reality of lewd abuse, the movie also highlights the lack of agency that women have in such situations and the hard ways in which they navigate for opportunities, with desperation that drives them towards prostitution for a decent living. The director situates his heroine amid a succession of lowlifes lying on her table begging her not to speak as she dully tenders her erotic ministrations for a final 'happy ending' with the disgusting reality of her father's repulsive desires amidst it all.

Kashyap's filmic mechanism here, enables one to envision the place of women both inside and outside bourgeois families and fantasies. With thought provoking songs such as 'Ladkhadaaya' and 'Karmari Duniya', the movie comes forth as a wake-up call for society to address the severity of female rights and protection and creation of a morally equal and just platform for them. The incest survivor thus comes to terms with the trauma and tragedy that has unfolded and removes herself from her present state of affairs and domesticity, for an uncertain future.

**Bhumika:** With its commentary on the mores of its time, particularly with respect to women and their place in society, the 1977 *Parallel Indian cinema* movie 'Bhumika', directed by **Shyam Benegal**, starring Smita Patil as its lead is based on the memoirs 'Sangtye Aika' of Hansa Wadkar, a Marathi stage and screen actress from the 1940s, and is set in the 1950s and 1960s India.



With an immensely successful career and enormous fame, it is the tale of Usha and her transformation from a vivacious teenager to a wiser but deeply wounded middle-aged who has a ravaged personal life consisting of years of parental trauma and series of unsuccessful relationships. From being raised by an abusive and alcoholic father to a husband whose fragile ego and nasty temper won't allow her to protect her peace, the movie is a strong critique on the Indian familial environment and perceived cultural normalcy. Usha's further relationships with the selfish director Sunil Verma and wealthy businessman Vinayak Kale pushes her back into her poisoned marriage. Due to lack of emotional intimacy stemming from a desperately unhappy woman, Usha seeks validation and support.

One of the strengths of the film is the way in which it portrays the complexities of human relationships. Usha's relationships with the men in her life are complex and tolling as she struggles to find a balance between her own desires and the expectations of others. The film is also a critique on the film industry, particularly with respect to the way in which women are portrayed in films. Usha is repeatedly downgraded by male filmmakers for not being "commercial" enough and is pressured to play roles that are demeaning to her identity and compromises with her dignity. The outrageous description of her personal life in everyday tabloids, is also a strong example of the double standards of the industry and media towards women and their personal life and choices.

Smita Patil has given a nuanced performance as Usha with subtle and insightful symbolism to female identity, one as that of a mother, a daughter, a wife, a mistress and an individual and reality of a society that remains so unsympathetic towards them. Usha portrays how *"The beds change, the kitchens change. Men's masks change, but men don't change."*

**Qala:** Covering the conflict of an artist against patriarchy and the tightly woven music industry of the late 40's and 50's India, **Anvita Dutt Guptan's** 2022 psychological thriller 'Qala' unravels the tale of a woman trying to find her place in an industry that remains unequal and a family that unwelcomes her; both based on stereotypical gender biases of its time. From deep rooted childhood trauma and societal learning and the state of her mental stability midst it all, the movie has covered it all fairly well. With brilliant cinematography of the vast valleys of Himachal Pradesh and an old school, retro feel in its descriptive lyrics and costumes, the personification that the snow-clad mountains depict of the cold mother-daughter relationship remains a startling feature of the film. The movie starring Tripti Dimri as the protagonist, Qala, swings back and forth between Qala's early years with her mother in Himachal to her journey as a renowned musician. This journey not only encompasses Qala's turmoil and trauma at the hands of her mother but also the constant injection of thoughts of being deficient as a singer; bizarrely based on her gender. Be it the anxiety of being replaced by a better singer – Jagan, played by debutant Babil Khan, or the helplessness of having to give into the ways of patriarchy and sexually exploiting herself to create a place of her own, Qala presents the agony of women with insufficient room to work for themselves in the world.

The audience witnesses Qala's close social learning to achieve her goal even if it compromises her dignity as she lacks the unconditional positive regard which she should have experienced as a child. Qala grew up in a house which witnessed her mother's intimate relationship with a wealthy man in exchange for professional favors. This exposure to the dark side of work life for women thus, propels Qala in her later years to replicate the whole with another music composer in exchange for her music record.

Qala is not just a psychological thriller but a message to vocalize the discrimination that takes place when art is being gendered. It is a message that enunciates patriarchy as a physical and mental assault. It is thus, the torment and guilt of a woman that is subjugated as a child and her quest in all extremities, to find a place in the world in order to prove her worth and the tragic realities that unfold with years of parental neglect and intergenerational trauma.

The impact of these films on female representation in cinema cannot be overstated. They've paved the way for a new generation of female filmmakers and actors, to create more nuanced and realistic portrayals of women on screen. This impact extends beyond just on-screen portrayals. It has also influenced the representation of women behind the camera.





#### POPCORN VENUS: WOMEN, MOVIES & THE AMERICAN DREAM:

**Marjorie Rosen's** 1973 book 'Popcorn Venus' became the earliest research in shedding light on female perspective and representation in films and the industry at large. The research covers women's roles in movies from the 1900s into the 1960s and early 1970s Hollywood, taking in account the representation of women both on and off screen with respect to the socio-cultural and political environment of the time. Rosen's work emphasizes on gender inequality and sexism that prevails in the movie business, for women as artists and as business workers.

With her spade work for future studies, Rosen divides the book into six sections based on specific time periods, covering female portrayal from the late 19th century to the later 20th century. It is a compelling and insightful analysis of the film industry and its treatment of women and has given voice not only to women from the west but to women around the globe with regards to their position in the entertainment industry and the effect it has on their image in society as individuals at large.

The opening chapter, '*Emerging from Victorianism*', presents the idea of films that were highly influenced by Victorian values for women. The content was heavily based on the domesticity of everyday life and chastity of women. While these ideas were upheld for films, women were either depicted as virgins or as vamps, with little room for complexity or multidimensional aspects of their personality. Rosen presents actresses such as Mae Marsh and Mary Pickford who were depicted as the eternal small girls with youth and tenderness in their eyes and played these roles, weirdly up until their 30s. In contrast to this Victorian idea was the idea of Theda Bara's Vamp like character- an overly sexual and cunning depiction of women. She had "*waist-length black hair, her darkly kohled eyes and crude exotic make-up.*"

Cinema in India has long put forth the idea of an ideal innocent, chaste, woman with no opinion or identity of her own, but one that is framed by the patriarchal structure, shaped by political, religious and cultural factors. Ideas like these have thus perpetuated harmful stereotypes for women and have closed rooms to joyous, content, living for them. Usha's 'Bhumika' as an artist in a male dominated industry is an ideal representation of such harmful position for women. Her role as a loyal, dedicated, wife and mother in her personal life and as an enticing actress behind camera, appropriately highlights the suffocation of women in their personal and professional life.

In the next chapter '*The Twenties-Wet Dreams in a Dry Land*', Rosen delves into the portrayal of women in films during the 1920s, a time that brought prosperity and new light for women as they gained the right to cast vote with a new wave of liberalization in their clothing. Though there was this sense of freedom in the air, Rosen points out its underlying sexualization. While hemlines became shorter and necklines deeper, women were now being perceived as objects of pleasure and on the contrary condemned to act upon their own sexual needs.

Ruth's ultimate trajectory in 'That girl in yellow boots' presents this debacle due to her sense of freeness. A beautiful, empowered woman, caught up in the cycle of search for her father is pushed between men for sexual gratification and is ultimately brought face to face with her own disturbing defeat.

Part three of Popcorn Venus, '*The Thirties- Sacrificial Lambs and the Politics of Fantasy*', examines films produced during the Great Depression in America. A wide discrepancy could be seen in what was unfolding in the domestic life for women and what was being played on screen. A new trope of Mysterious woman characters, often in search of something rose rapidly. Though there was now the image of an empowered, working woman, sexism was still evident alongside the independent surface women were allowed to have. The ultimate result of the actions boiled down to submission or defeat of women characters to their male counterparts. Greta Garbo's character in 'Susan Lennox- Her Rise and Fall', stands as its prime example. Indian cinematic productions have used sex as an economic tool for women for years now, due to limited work opportunities for women which has led to greater objectification. Both 'Qala' and 'That Girl in Yellow Boots' present the issue of limited workforce for women, leading protagonists to engage in sexual intercourse with or without their full consent. On the other hand, 'Bhumika' truly highlights the notion of an unhappy marriage and unsatisfied sexual needs but a constant, agonizing return to it all.



*The Forties- Necessity as the mother of Emancipation* explores the 1940s of American cinema and its influence around the world during war time crises. Women, though enrolled in school, were depicted in search of husbands and thus their education becoming secondary. Films became comically bizarre with exaggeration of female characters in male roles. Due to this 'overly empowered' representation of women, 'pinup' women characters emerged. This led to unrealistic standards of beauty and physicality for women to look and dress a certain way and one that has impacted society all around to this date.

*The Fifties- Losing Ground* section sheds light on the post war era of cinema. In the domestic sphere, marriage became a crucial element for women for economic stability and societal acceptance. In films, tales of spinsters were depicted as an isolated trope. There was also a shift in female representation and were now a symbol of sex. Soft, curvy figures were now popular with the emergence of actresses like Marilyn Monroe.

Indian cinematic productions like the 'Dirty picture', 'Lipstick Under My Burkha' and 'Miss lovely', present this archetype of overly sexualized and obscene female representation. Films such as 'Turning 30' and 'Motichoor Chaknachoor' depict the need a male counterpart for social acceptance.

The last section, *Sixties into Seventies- Revolution and Renaissance* witnessed a leniency in censorship with the depiction of the sexual needs and life of women, a topic that had long been considered taboo. While this newfound sexual freedom for women should have contributed to their overall sense of independence ironically, added fuel to their sexualization, reducing them as sex objects. Cinema lacked romance and intimacy and was only a medium for voyeuristic satisfaction of the male gaze.

Films like 'Bhumika', 'That Girl in Yellow Boots' and 'Qala', depict progressive women of Indian society who've tried to mark their presence in every dimension of their life but have similarly been reduced in their quest for self-fulfillment and objectified for male pleasure. Rosen's 'Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies & The American Dream' has been a progressive and crucial work in the study of women and cinema since the early days of silent films to that of the post war modern world.

## CONCLUSION

*"Films have been a mirror held up to society's porous face. They therefore reflect the changing societal image of women-which, until recently, has not been taken seriously enough."*

Moving past the old-fashioned and repetitive style of cinema, one encounters every day, cinema should activate itself as a medium of expression and societal questioning. While movies like Thappad, Mary Kom, Kahaani, Mardaani, English Vinglish, Mom and No one killed Jessica have put forth empowered female characters, undefined by a dependency on their male counterparts, India cinema still has a long way to go with regards to rightful representation of the marginalized.

The male gaze encompasses not only the view of the male character but also the camera angle and the gaze of the male spectator. All of this results in a highly problematic perception towards women. Not only is sexism an issue but focus should also shift in breaking down the internalized misogyny and self-objectification among women. With it being such an impressionistic medium, it is essential for cinema to redefine its narratives with regards to women of the society.

While movies like Thappad, Mary Kom, Kahaani, Mardaani, English Vinglish, Mom and No one killed Jessica have put forth empowered female characters, undefined by a dependency on their male counterparts, India cinema still has a long way to go with regards to rightful representation of the marginalized.

The study recommends a breakdown of the needs of women of society and a just representation of it on screen for building a healthy pattern of co-existence. With its aim to bring forth the dark reality of women through the off- and on-screen role of women in the film and with regards to research from various forms of cinema and film theories, the research concludes a need for an equal society which will enable a healthier future.



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