

The Role of Cinema in Depicting Women Characters: An Indian Perspective

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Received: 23rd Sep 2025 Accepted: 08th Oct 2025 Published: 22nd Oct 2025</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: Indian cinema, women in film, gender representation, Bollywood, feminist film studies, cultural norms.</p>	<p>This article explores the role of cinema in portraying women characters within the Indian film industry, analyzing the evolution of female representation from early Indian cinema to contemporary films. Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has been both a mirror and a catalyst for societal attitudes toward women, often reflecting the prevailing cultural norms, while at times challenging and reshaping gender roles. The study critically examines the stereotypical portrayals of women, such as the sacrificial mother, dutiful wife, or objectified heroine, and contrasts them with progressive depictions of independent, empowered women seen in recent films. By drawing on examples from key films across different decades, the paper highlights the shifts in narrative, character development, and gender dynamics. Additionally, it discusses the influence of feminist movements, changing societal values, and the growing presence of female filmmakers in these evolving representations. The study concludes by reflecting on how Indian cinema both shapes and is shaped by the nation's socio-cultural context, contributing to ongoing discussions about gender equality and women's empowerment.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

Cinema has been a powerful medium for storytelling, shaping public perception, and reinforcing or challenging societal norms. In India, where cinema is deeply woven into the cultural fabric, the representation of women has undergone a significant evolution over time. This review article explores the portrayal of women in Indian cinema, highlighting the transformations in their roles, the socio-cultural contexts, and the impact on gender perception.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA

Indian cinema began its journey in the early 20th century, especially Bollywood. The portrayal of women in the early decades of Indian cinema was often traditional and rooted in patriarchal ideologies. Women were frequently depicted as passive, submissive figures, often idealized as mothers, wives, or lovers, reinforcing the virtues of sacrifice, chastity, and family duty.

In the 1950s and 60s, directors like **Raj Kapoor** and **Guru Dutt** presented women as symbols of purity and devotion, but the narratives were predominantly male-centric. Actresses like **Nargis**, **Meena Kumari**, and **Madhubala** were portrayed in roles that were largely secondary to the male protagonists. Still, their performances contributed significantly to the emotional depth of the films.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA

With the advent of parallel cinema in the 1970s and 80s, Indian filmmakers began exploring more nuanced and layered portrayals of women. Directors like **Shyam Benegal**, **Satyajit Ray**, and **Aparna Sen** depicted women characters who defied traditional gender roles, representing them as complex individuals with aspirations, conflicts, and strengths.

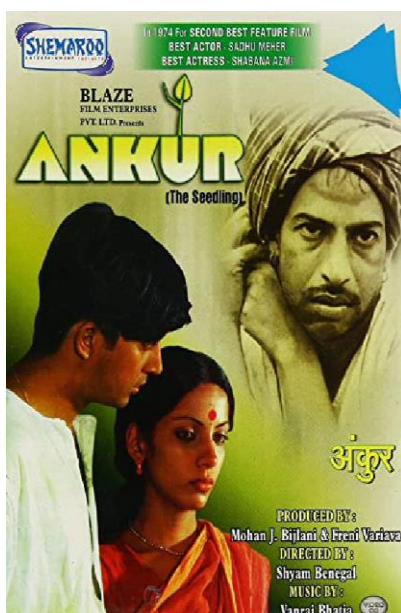


Fig.1 Poster of Ankur

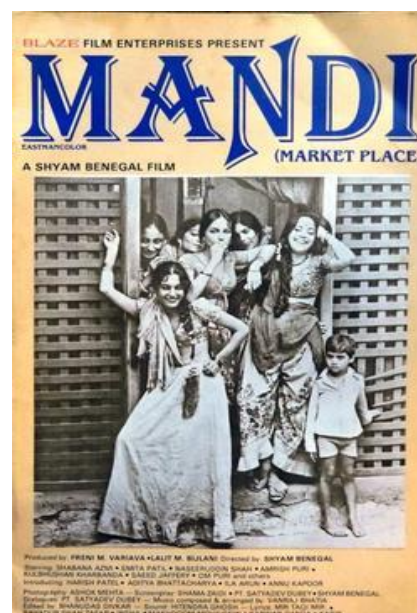


Fig.2 Poster of Mandi

Films such as *Arth (1982)*, *Ankur (1974)*, and *Mandi (1983)* challenged the stereotypes of women as passive victims of patriarchy. These films explored issues such as female autonomy, agency, and empowerment. Women in these films were no longer restricted to the domestic sphere; they were individuals who questioned societal norms and struggled with their identity.

MODERN CINEMA: BALANCING TRADITION AND PROGRESS

In the 21st century, Indian cinema has witnessed a significant transformation in how women are portrayed on screen. The roles have become more diverse, and filmmakers are beginning to break free from the traditional mold of female characters. Movies like *Queen (2013)*, *Piku (2015)*, *Tumhari Sulu (2017)*, and *Mission Mangal (2019)* reflect the growing trend of strong, independent women who navigate life on their terms. These films emphasize women's independence, career aspirations, and emotional resilience, catering to an audience that seeks more realistic and empowered portrayals.



Fig.3 Mission Mangal Poster

However, it's important to acknowledge that mainstream Bollywood often continues to objectify women, with a focus on their physical appearance and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. "Item numbers" and hyper-sexualized portrayals still dominate many commercial films, reducing female characters to mere spectacles rather than offering meaningful narratives.

REGIONAL CINEMA AND THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN

Beyond Bollywood, Indian regional cinema has made notable strides in depicting women characters with greater depth and realism. Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, and Marathi cinemas, among others, have provided platforms for strong female characters. Films such as *Kahaani (2012)*, *How Old Are You (2014)*, and *Sairat (2016)* explore the lives of women within the unique socio-cultural contexts of different regions in India.

Regional filmmakers often address gender-specific issues such as dowry, domestic violence, and female education more directly than their Bollywood counterparts, allowing for a more localized and intimate portrayal of women's struggles and triumphs.

IMPACT OF FEMINISM AND CHANGING NARRATIVES

The rise of feminist movements in India has had a significant impact on how women are depicted in cinema. With increased awareness of gender equality, there is a growing demand for authentic portrayals of women, free from objectification and patriarchy. Filmmakers like **Zoya Akhtar**, **Meghna Gulzar**, and **Alankrita Shrivastava** have brought fresh perspectives to women's stories, focusing on female desires, sexuality, and the right to live freely.

Films like *Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016)* and *Thappad (2020)* question deep-seated patriarchal values, providing audiences with critical reflections on women's autonomy, consent, and empowerment. These narratives mark a shift from merely portraying women as victims to presenting them as empowered individuals who challenge societal norms and take control of their lives.

CHALLENGES AND CRITICISM

Despite the positive changes, Indian cinema still grapples with several challenges regarding the depiction of women. There is a stark contrast between the progressive, feminist narratives and the regressive depictions that continue to dominate a large section of commercial cinema. The dichotomy between the "modern" woman, who is celebrated for her independence, and the "ideal" woman, who conforms to traditional values, persists in many films.

Additionally, the intersectionality of gender with caste, religion, and class remains underexplored in mainstream Indian cinema. The portrayal of Dalit women or women from marginalized communities is often simplistic and devoid of the complexities that such identities entail.

CONCLUSION

Indian cinema has played a crucial role in shaping societal views on women, oscillating between traditional and progressive portrayals. While significant strides have been made towards more empowered representations, the journey is far from complete. As Indian society continues to evolve, cinema too must evolve, reflecting the diverse realities of women's lives across the country. The future of women in Indian cinema lies in breaking free from patriarchal frameworks and embracing stories that celebrate the full spectrum of women's experiences.

This balance between tradition and progress, between commercial success and meaningful storytelling, will define how cinema contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in India.

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