

# Empowered depiction on Women in Selected Films

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## Abstract

Contemporary Hindi cinema increasingly foregrounds women as agents of resistance rather than passive bearers of patriarchy, yet these representations remain uneven and contested. This article examines empowered depictions of women in selected Hindi films—*Mother India* (1957), *Bhumika* (1977), *Arth* (1982), *Fire* (1996), *Mirch Masala* (1989), *Gulaab Gang* (2014), *Parched* (2015), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Mardaani* (2014), *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Kahaani* (2012), and *Pink* (2016)—to analyse how female protagonists challenge or reproduce dominant gender ideologies. Using feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze” and standpoint/gender-empowerment frameworks, the study undertakes qualitative textual and thematic analysis of narrative structure, characterisation, and visual style. The article argues that while these films construct new imaginaries of women as rights-bearing citizens, professionals, and avengers, they often remain tethered to familial morality, heteronormativity, and the need for male endorsement. The conclusion suggests that women-centric films function as important cultural texts that both reflect and shape evolving discourses on gender justice in India, even as they reveal the limits of cinematic feminism within a commercial industry.

**Keywords:** Hindi cinema; women’s empowerment; feminist film theory; male gaze; gender equality.

## 1. Introduction

Cinema in India functions as a powerful cultural institution that shapes everyday understandings of gender, sexuality, and citizenship across classes and regions. As one of the most pervasive forms of popular culture, Hindi films do not merely mirror social realities; they participate in constructing norms around femininity, domesticity, labour, and desire. Historically, mainstream narratives framed women as sacrificial mothers, dutiful wives, or eroticised spectacle, thereby naturalising their dependence on men and their confinement to the private sphere.<sup>[8][4][6][11]</sup>

Over the last few decades, however, there has been a visible rise in women-centric films and complex female leads that indicate shifting gender imaginaries in the public sphere. Trade and critical discourses now regularly speak of “women-oriented” or “female-led” films, and box-office data suggest that such projects have begun to find both audiences and awards recognition. Yet the label “empowerment” is often deployed uncritically in publicity, reviews, and policy rhetoric, obscuring the subtle ways in which even apparently radical narratives may reinscribe patriarchal logics. This article intervenes in these debates by undertaking a close reading of selected Hindi films that foreground women as central protagonists negotiating structures of patriarchy, caste, class, and the state. It asks how far these films move from earlier tropes of female suffering to construct women as agential political subjects, and what constraints mark their cinematic empowerment.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarship on women and Indian cinema has a long genealogy within film studies and feminist cultural criticism. Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998) describe popular Hindi cinema as a narrative of cultural change in which gendered images act as key sites for negotiating modernity and tradition. Seema Shekhawat's work on Hindi parallel cinema similarly emphasises that representations of women operate as allegories for wider social transformations and conflicts.

Within global feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" conceptualises classical cinema as organised through a "male gaze" that positions woman as image and man as bearer of the look. Her claim that "women are bearers, not makers, of meaning" has been widely used to critique Indian films where heroines serve primarily as romantic interest, spectacle, or moral conscience. Subsequent work, however, complicates this binary by foregrounding female spectatorship, women's authorship, and hybrid popular forms

Recent empirical studies analysing film content across decades note a gradual shift from purely decorative or sacrificial roles towards more varied, professional, and assertive female characters, even if stereotypes persist. Content analyses of women-centric films like *Mary Kom*, *Dangal*, *Pink*, *Parched* and *Uda Punjab* show that empowerment is often framed through narratives of individual resilience rather than structural transformation, and that upper-class or urban women are over-represented. Journalistic and online criticism has also pointed out contradictions within ostensibly feminist films, arguing that some projects recentre male saviours or trivialise intersectional realities of caste, religion, and rural marginalisation.

The present study extends this literature by reading landmark women-centric films across decades—from *Mother India* and *Bhumika* to *Parched*, *Gulaab Gang* and *Pink*—through a common analytical frame, thereby tracing continuities as well as ruptures in the cinematic discourse on women's empowerment.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Feminist Film Theory and the Gaze

Mulvey's concept of the male gaze remains a foundational point of departure for this article. Classical narrative cinema, in her formulation, aligns the camera, narrative, and audience identification with a masculinised subject-position that looks at woman as erotic object, spectacle, or threat. In mainstream Hindi cinema, song-and-dance sequences, fetishised close-ups, and narrative arcs that punish "deviant" women have historically reinforced this structure.

An empowered depiction, in this light, must be read not only at the level of dialogue or overt message but in terms of who looks, who acts, and whose desire drives the story. The analysis therefore attends to:

- Whether the woman is the narrative centre or a catalyst for male transformation.
- How the camera frames her body and labour.

- Whether she has interiority, backstory, and moral ambiguity, or exists as a symbol.

### 3.2 Standpoint and Gender-Empowerment Approaches

Building on standpoint theory and gender-empowerment indices used in previous work on Hindi films, the article situates cinematic women within intersecting axes of class, caste, marital status, and region. Empowerment is here understood not merely as individual assertion but as:

- Enhanced decision-making power over body, work, mobility, and relationships.
- Collective action or solidarity among women.
- The ability to challenge institutional structures—family, state, market, or community.

The framework thus evaluates whether films allow female protagonists to move from being victims or moral signifiers to becoming agents who reconfigure social relations.

## 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in textual and thematic analysis. It does not claim statistical generalisability but seeks depth of understanding of representative films across different eras and subgenres.

### 4.1 Film Selection

The corpus comprises twelve Hindi films widely cited in scholarship and criticism as significant for women's representation, spanning the period 1957–2016: *Mother India* (1957), *Bhumika* (1977), *Arth* (1982), *Mirch Masala* (1989), *Fire* (1996), *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Mardaani* (2014), *Gulaab Gang* (2014), *Parched* (2015), *Kahaani* (2012), and *Pink* (2016). These titles were chosen because:

- They foreground female protagonists in publicity and narrative.
- They explicitly engage questions of gender, power, and social justice.
- They have been discussed in academic, journalistic, or activist writing on women-centric cinema.

### 4.2 Analytical Procedure

Each film was viewed multiple times and analysed along four axes, adapted from existing content-analysis tools:

1. **Narrative function:** protagonist/antagonist, catalyst, victim, or moral emblem.
2. **Agency and decision-making:** choices regarding work, sexuality, mobility, and resistance.
3. **Representation of social structures:** family, community, state institutions, and markets.

#### 4. **Visual and aural strategies:** camera angles, song picturisation, costume, and sound design.

Secondary sources—including reviews, interviews, and prior academic analyses—were consulted to contextualise reception and industrial discourse around each film. The goal was to trace patterns rather than provide exhaustive scene-by-scene readings.

### 5. From Sacrificial Mother to Complex Subject: Early Benchmarks

#### 5.1 Mother India and the Myth of the Nation-Mother

Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) remains a foundational text in discussions of women and the nation. Radha, played by Nargis, embodies the agrarian, self-sacrificing mother who single-handedly sustains her family against feudal exploitation, natural disasters, and filial rebellion. Her ultimate decision to kill her criminalised son for the sake of community honour has been read as both a radical assertion of female moral authority and a reinforcement of patriarchal codes that demand maternal sacrifice.

Through a standpoint lens, Radha has immense symbolic power but limited personal liberation: her agency is exercised within the framework of upholding the village and nation, not challenging their gendered hierarchies. Nevertheless, the film sets a precedent for centring a woman as moral core and narrative anchor of a big-budget social melodrama.

#### 5.2 Bhumika and Arth: Autonomy, Desire, and the Public Woman

Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika* (1977), inspired by the life of actress Hansa Wadkar, marks a crucial shift from mythic motherhood to a more self-reflexive exploration of a woman's search for artistic, emotional, and sexual freedom. Usha, played by Smita Patil, navigates exploitative men—director, husband, lovers—while attempting to retain a sense of self beyond male desire and public scandal. Her repeated exits from oppressive relationships signal a refusal of victimhood, yet the film also underscores the structural constraints surrounding a woman associated with cinema and scandal.<sup>[4][5][1]</sup>

Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* (1982) similarly presents Pooja (Shabana Azmi) as a middle-class wife who chooses self-reliance after her husband's infidelity, rejecting both the adulterous spouse and the possibility of remarriage as her only routes to security. By ending with her decision to live independently and adopt a child, the film inaugurates a cinematic vocabulary of urban, working women asserting autonomy while remaining anchored in an ethic of care.

### 6. Collective Resistance and Rural Patriarchy

#### 6.1 Mirch Masala: Solidarity against the State-Patriarch

Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* (1989) is widely recognised as a landmark feminist film depicting the collective resistance of rural women against feudal and state power. The village women, led by Sonbai (Smita Patil) and supported by an elderly watchwoman, Ashta Bua, barricade themselves inside a spice factory to resist sexual violence by the subedar, a colonial tax officer.<sup>[5][4]</sup>

Unlike earlier films where rape or harassment serves merely as melodramatic plot device, *Mirch Masala* foregrounds women's collective agency: the climactic attack on the subedar with chilli powder symbolically turns the tools of their labour into weapons of defence. The narrative, however, leaves open the question of what structural changes follow this uprising, underscoring the fragility of such victories.

## 6.2 Gulaab Gang and Parched: Ambivalent Empowerment

Soumik Sen's *Gulaab Gang* (2014), loosely inspired by the real-life Gulabi Gang, portrays Rajjo (Madhuri Dixit) and her band of sari-clad vigilantes fighting domestic violence, caste oppression, and political corruption in rural North India. The film projects striking images of women wielding lathis, running an ashram for abused women, and contesting elections, thereby staging visual empowerment through physical strength and sisterhood. Critics, however, argue that its melodramatic tone, stylised violence, and limited engagement with caste and economic structures dilute its feminist potential and convert activism into spectacle

Leena Yadav's *Parched* (2015), set in rural Rajasthan, offers a more grounded portrayal of three women—Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli—struggling against child marriage, marital rape, and social stigma. Reviews emphasise how the film balances harsh realities with moments of female camaraderie and erotic self-discovery, culminating in the protagonists' decision to leave their village and seek a different life. Here empowerment is constructed as both inner awakening and collective escape from oppressive structures, though the open-ended conclusion leaves the durability of this liberation uncertain.

## 7. Urban Professionals, Law, and the State

### 7.1 No One Killed Jessica and Mardaani: Women within Institutions

Raj Kumar Gupta's *No One Killed Jessica* (2011) juxtaposes the quiet determination of Sabrina Lal with the aggressive investigative zeal of journalist Meera Gaity (Rani Mukerji) in the context of a high-profile murder case. The film represents women as central to mobilising public opinion, reopening a stalled case, and challenging elite impunity, using the news media as a key site of feminist agency. At the same time, it depends heavily on the charismatic, profanity-laced persona of Meera as exceptional figure, raising questions about the accessibility of such empowerment to ordinary women.

In *Mardaani* (2014), Rani Mukerji again plays a powerful institutional figure, this time as Shivani Shivaji Roy, a police officer tackling child trafficking networks. The film's visual language emphasises her physical courage, investigative skills, and refusal to be intimidated by male criminals, thus inverting traditional gendered expectations within the action genre. Yet the narrative still relies on a vigilantism that personalises structural issues like trafficking and corruption, suggesting that systemic change hinges on a single heroic officer rather than broader institutional reform.

### 7.2 Mary Kom: Sporting Bodies and National Pride

Omung Kumar's *Mary Kom* (2014) dramatises the life of world champion boxer Mary Kom, charting her journey from rural Manipur to international sporting success while negotiating motherhood and marriage. The film celebrates a woman whose body is trained for combat rather than display, directly challenging the stereotype that sports and physical strength are inappropriate for Indian women. It also frames Mary's achievements as a matter of national pride, thereby aligning women's empowerment with the project of post-liberalisation nation-branding.

However, critics point out that the casting of Priyanka Chopra and the Bollywoodisation of Kom's story flatten specific regional and ethnic experiences, turning a complex political journey into a more generic underdog narrative. Empowerment here is closely tied to exceptional talent and state recognition, leaving little space for collective struggle or structural critique.

### **8. Negotiating Law, Consent, and Everyday Misogyny: *Kahaani* and *Pink***

Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani* (2012) offers one of the most intriguing female protagonists in recent Hindi cinema in the figure of Vidya Bagchi (Vidya Balan), a pregnant woman who travels to Kolkata ostensibly in search of her missing husband. The narrative gradually reveals her as an avenger orchestrating an elaborate plan to eliminate a terrorist while exploiting assumptions about female vulnerability and pregnancy. Vidya's mastery over the investigative process, use of disguise, and manipulation of institutional actors recasts the "damsel in distress" into a strategist whose deception unsettles both patriarchy and the audience.

Anubhav Sinha's *Pink* (2016) explicitly addresses the politics of consent, moral policing, and victim-blaming after three young women are assaulted by privileged men in Delhi. The courtroom drama centres around a retired male lawyer (Amitabh Bachchan) who deconstructs stereotypes surrounding "modern girls" and asserts that "no means no," a phrase that became a cultural shorthand for sexual consent in India. Reviews acknowledge the film's powerful indictment of misogynistic legal and social attitudes while also noting the paradox that women's voices are ultimately validated through the speech of an older male saviour.

Both films thus dramatise women's struggles against violence and systemic bias, but they differ in the distribution of narrative agency: *Kahaani* allows its heroine to control the plot entirely, while *Pink* shares narrative centrality between its female victims and the male advocate who articulates their rights.

### **9. Discussion**

Across the selected films, several patterns emerge that illuminate the evolving nature and limits of empowered representation. First, there is a clear shift from early images of sacrificial motherhood to more varied subject positions—actress, journalist, cop, boxer, vigilante, survivor—suggesting an expanded imagination of women's roles in public life. Second, empowerment is frequently narrated through individual exceptionalism: the courageous mother, the fearless cop, the world-class athlete, or

the mastermind avenger. Structural critique—of caste, class, communalism, or neoliberal precarities—tends to remain in the background or is resolved through the triumph of a singular protagonist.

Third, while many of these films challenge the male gaze by granting women narrative agency, subjectivity, and interiority, they do not entirely escape objectification or moral policing. Costuming, song picturisation, and casting choices often reiterate conventional beauty norms even when the characters are framed as “strong.” Moreover, the intersectional realities of caste, religion, sexuality, and disability are unevenly addressed: rural and Dalit women’s experiences surface in *Mirch Masala*, *Gulaab Gang* and *Parched*, but queer desire remains marginal outside of *Fire* and a few recent parallel-cinema projects.

Finally, industrial and audience contexts matter: trade reports and commentary highlight both the growing commercial viability of women-centric films and the persistent perception that such projects are “risky” unless anchored by major stars or male directors. This shapes which stories are green-lit, how they are marketed, and how far they can push against dominant patriarchal sensibilities

## 10. Conclusion

The selected films collectively reveal that Hindi cinema has moved significantly beyond the docile, decorative heroine towards portraying women who confront violence, negotiate institutions, and claim public space. At the same time, cinematic empowerment remains circumscribed by persistent narrative, aesthetic, and industrial constraints that continue to centre heteronormative respectability, individual heroism, and male endorsement.

For future research, a larger sample using systematic content analysis could quantify shifts in screen time, occupation, dialogue distribution, and visual framing of female characters across decades. Comparative studies involving regional cinemas and streaming platforms may also illuminate how new production and distribution ecologies are reshaping gender representation. The ongoing conversation between feminist film theory, audience studies, and industry analysis remains essential to understanding how cinema participates in the broader struggle for gender equality in India.

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