

Women of Cinema: Indian and Western Femininity on Screen

Princi Mishra (Ph.D Scholar), Dr. Rachana Gangwar (Associate Professor)

Ph. D Scholar, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

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ABSTRACT

Cinema serves as a compact reflection of the world we inhabit, and its portrayal of women elucidates the current condition of women in our society. Throughout history, the craft of narrative construction through a camera has undergone significant evolution. In the past, the representation of female actors in cinema was notably scarce; however, contemporary audiences now frequently encounter films led by women. The representation of femininity in cinema remains an area that requires further exploration and refinement. The representation of women in visual media has seen a significant enhancement. The representation of femininity requires refinement; filmmakers must grasp the essence of femininity and embrace it, rather than merely presenting a contrast to masculinity as a depiction of femininity in their works. Women in films ought to transcend the roles of mere damsels in distress or symbols of chastity on screen. Filmmakers must approach the portrayal of women in films with the respect and complexity they deserve. The nuanced representations of women in cinema are infrequently explored. Female narratives remain infrequently represented in cinema, with their roles often being significant yet lacking in impact. The representation of women in the cinematic realm reflects the perceptions held by men.

Keyword: Women, Cinema, Portrayal, Movies, Films, Feminism, Femininity, Indian Films, Western Films

INTRODUCTION

Cinema has, from its inception, elevated women in a particular manner while simultaneously encroaching upon their femininity. Since the inception of theatre, women have been systematically excluded from the spotlight, often relegated to roles portrayed by men, who frequently failed to capture the essence of these characters with any degree of authenticity. Film serves a crucial function in influencing the thoughts and perspectives of individuals and the collective society. The following research compares the top-grossing films from Bollywood and Hollywood in 2023, looking at how women are shown in these movies and the different ways each industry represents Indian and Western femininity.

METHODOLOGY

Visual analysis has been conducted, purposive sampling has been employed and descriptive and narrative style has been followed to describing the findings.

Understanding Femininity¹ and Masculinity²

Femininity and masculinity can be defined as the characteristics or typical nature of a woman and man, respectively. We can understand sex at the biological level of the individual, while femininity or masculinity represent the cultural and psychological manifestation of the same. These characteristics are not absolute, and they can vary depending on culture, society, religion, and other social or environmental circumstances. Everyday roles frequently shape cultural or societal conceptions of femininity and masculinity. The meanings we take from everything around us can be separated into two categories: feminine and masculine.

¹ Mehta, Clare & Henry, Victoria. (2017). Femininity. 10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_1076-1.

² Kachel, S., Steffens, M. C., & Niedlich, C. (2016). Traditional Masculinity and Femininity: Validation of a new scale assessing Gender Roles. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00956>

Gender Roles: How are they Perceived in the Society

Individuals are anticipated to behave, articulate, attire, groom, and conduct themselves in accordance with the standards established by the society to which they belong, reflecting what is deemed appropriate for their gender. Societal conventions dictate that individuals of different genders conform to specific behaviours, attire, and conduct as prescribed by cultural expectations. Society imposes distinct expectations on individuals based on their gender, encompassing not only men and women but also those who identify as part of the third gender.

For Example-

Gender roles defined by the society demand from men to be confident, aggressive, financially independent, opt for professions perceived masculine; like pilots, engineers, armed forces, etc., men are expected to dress a certain way and groom accordingly, etc. Women on the other hand are expected to be soft and fragile in nature, nurturing and caring, emotional and vulnerable, domesticated, choose professions like; teachers, nurses, etc.

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Cinema and Gender Stereotypes³⁴: Indian⁵ and Western Femininity on Screen

Cinema has evolved significantly from its early days of complete male dominance. The depiction of women has undergone substantial transformation. Female characters are assuming pivotal parts and even driving the films, while equal representation remains elusive; however, notable progress is evident.

Films possess the capacity to facilitate social change, perpetuate societal prejudices, and influence perceptions of femininity. The audience's perception of female characters is influenced both by the audience itself and by the manner in which these characters are depicted.

Description of Visual Analysis of Films

'Barbie 2023' Highest Grossing Female Led Hollywood Film of 2023

Released on 21st August 2023, the film stars Margot Robbie the stereotypical Barbie, Ryan Gosling the stereotypical Ken, America Ferrera Gloria, Ariana Greenblatt Sasha and Will Ferrell The CEO of Mattel.

The story centres on Robbie, sometimes known as Barbie, as she returns to the real world after her pink and happy universe collapses. The story of this movie is unique among fairy tales we have seen before. It deals with real-life issues, and not even a few minutes into the film do we see Barbie dealing with an inexhaustible sense of death, and to combat this, she is transported to the human world to meet her human (the child who plays with her), as she believes her human is the source of her thoughts and wishes to make things right for them. She encounters psychological problems and sexualisation common to women today in the real world. Ken succumbs to the norms of masculine behaviour in real life, thereby introducing Barbie Land to the concept of patriarchy.

³ Santoniccolo, F., Trombetta, T., Paradiso, M. N., & Rollè, L. (2023). Gender and Media Representations: A review of the literature on gender stereotypes, objectification and sexualization. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(10), 5770. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105770>

⁴ Tabassum, Naznin & Nayak, Bhabani. (2021). Gender Stereotypes and Their Impact on Women's Career Progressions from a Managerial Perspective. *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review*. 10. 227797522097551. 10.1177/2277975220975513.

⁵ Purohit, Sambhav & Bhatti, Aayushi. (2021). *FEMINISM AND ITS CHANGING GOALS IN INDIA*.



The film critiques misogyny and patriarchy by flipping traditional gender roles, assigning the roles typically played by men to Barbies instead. Barbie, when she meets her human Sasha, challenges her about the unrealistic beauty standards and the existential crisis it brings. The film explores the challenges related to body image that young girls encounter in the modern world.

The story unfolds in a world where Barbies live in a matriarchal society, allowing girls to pursue their dreams freely, while Ken lacks his own identity and is primarily recognised through his connection with Barbie. One day, Barbie begins to feel something unusual and a sense of impending doom. She begins to wonder if her human is going through a tough time, so she decides to go to the real world to help out, and Ken goes with her. The real world feels really different from their own; it's super male-dominated, and Ken is really impacted by this. He wants to share his experiences when he returns to Barbieland.

Barbie seems like a simplified effort to just swap the roles of men and women to show how society influences gender roles and their impact on people. The film showcases fundamental themes of American Feminism and Patriarchy. Ken, influenced by traditional patriarchal ideas, makes a shallow yet entertaining effort to establish a similar structure in Barbieland, attempting to challenge the decaying patriarchy. The film highlights the negatives to ultimately reveal the positives.

The way the movie represents femininity can definitely be described as whimsical and over the top right from the start. Barbie's looks are designed to be very appealing, which can draw attention from guys and lead to problems with body image. It's arguable that films often prioritise financial gain, which clearly shows how society views women and defines femininity. The movie challenges society's unhealthy expectations of femininity by representing it in a different way.

Barbie really shows how women in the west are often expected to have these perfect bodies, but it doesn't really talk about the challenges that come with that at all. The well-known monologue tries to convey a message, but the imagery in the film presents a contrasting narrative. The movie seems to create a misleading portrayal of femininity and explores the extremes of both patriarchy and feminism. However, there was no effort to discuss how women face criticism when they strive to achieve everything and the challenges they encounter in the process.

‘Kerala Stories’, Highest Grossing Female Led Bollywood Film of 2023



Released on 5th May, 2023, in theatres and ZEE5 has the streaming rights, A rated.

Three young ladies from Kerala caught in the trap of terror cell were being pushed to convert into Islam and fight for the same, according to the movie. Under the cover of false promises of marriage and a good life, Asifa here wants to convert Shalini Unnikrishnan, Geetanjali, Nimah, and Asifa to Islam. The story sees Shalini meeting these three females during her nursing training. The film follows Fatima, who is at a UN detention facility under interrogation after being rescued by a UN peacekeeping force from the Trarata desert. Fatima i.e. Shalini tells the narrative from the perspective of her companions who were caught in a nexus of ISIS and local extremist groups of Kerala. Geetanjali is another major character; her father is a fervent communist. Then we come upon the Catholic third girl Nimah. The narrative mostly centres on these three people who arrived at this nursing school from all throughout Kerala hoping for a bright future. Extreme gang recruiter and fourth flatmate seeks to turn three into suicide bombers. Her male colleagues assist her in trying to make these girls fall in love by means of careful planning and staging. When Shalini is pregnant and Asifa pushes marriage and conversion to her, things change. Shalini sees her only choice as her fear of being shunned by her family haunts her. While both Geetanjali and Shalini want to become Muslims, Nimah objects and suffers gang rape as a result. Clearly, there are themes of dread, violence, nativity, crime, coercion, approaching catastrophes, and fear. Shalini agrees since she believes it to be the only practical choice after fearing unacceptance from a family already mentally crippled. While both Shalini and Geetanjali handle this conversion, Nimah fights and ultimately gets gang-raped. After intensive training, Fatima travels to Sri Lanka to spread Islam alongside her terrorist husband. She soon enough finds herself caught and begins to doubt the surroundings. She tries to flee and is discovered by UN soldiers; she is imprisoned on suspicions of being a terrorist. Though the film received some complaints of being a propagandist and its assertions of being a genuine narrative were under examination, what worries this study is the way female leads and femininity are portrayed. The film exposes how naive these young women are and how easily they might be controlled by sly guys looking for their own advantage under the cover of marriage and love. They were thrown off once they became useless for them. The film lacked character development; hence, the viewers yearned for a solid background. Though it is a female-centred tale, the Kerala plot lacks strong female characters. The female characters lack depth because only events happen to them based on one

choice, so there is no chain of events that might have developed the characters. Every difficulty the female characters have has no effect at all. It turns out to be a literal dead end at last.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The movie *Barbie* shows the women in positions of power and are carrying the roles of writers, Nobel Prize Laureates, Justice and The President as well, which sends a powerful message to the real-world order of things by challenging the status quo of patriarchy throughout the world. To the audience's surprise, the existential crisis faced by Ken and his realisation of being more than just Ken echoes softly the condition of women in the real world and the need to have a self-realisation of the same. His realisation of self resonates with the need of women to realise their worth apart from their male counterparts. The movie also attacks the undue and unrealistic expectations of the society of being perfect and beautiful according to the bar set by it for women. It conveys the message that women are worthy of their own being and don't need the validation from anyone for that.

Barbieland glances at a sense of self norms of society, and gender stereotypes. It challenges a tyrannical government. The movie never overwhelms the viewers; rather, it questions the accepted wisdom progressively. Barbies are used in the movie to start a conversation on the core of feminism and the responsibilities of women outside traditional roles. Ken also shows the changes in masculinity. This movie looks at how toxic feminism affects women in society. Barbie's universe and reality are juxtaposed to highlight the need of men and women embracing their genuine selves since neither of them is better than the other. Each have a place in the world. The Barbie's extremely sexualized representation puts in light how women are objectified and society wants them to be in a certain way.

The three young women caught as victims of Love Jihad are the focus of *The Kerla Stories*. Let us approach the movie as a fact for the sake of debate even though it has generated controversy and claims on its function as both a propaganda tool and a mirror of reality. This particular story certainly connects with a different side of reality even if it is finally fake. This is a harsh reality in some parts of the world; women are being driven by different terrorist groups to participate in acts of violence for the advantage of these groups worldwide. The movie depicts the suffering of women in society and their hopelessness upon being victims of a terrorist group. Many often, people in their search for love and a better life fall for false promises veiled under the cover of marriage and a happy future. Kerala is one of the most educated states, and these women are choosing professions in nursing; nonetheless, they sometimes fail to see the underlying motivations of some males, so unintentionally finding themselves in danger.

The representation of femininity lacks depth and complexity. The portrayal of female leads is predominantly limited to victimisation. The movie and the portrayal of female roles must be considered within the broader context of the film's central issue. Women are often categorised as either naïve, cunning, victims of abuse, or damsels in distress. The narrative presents numerous unresolved elements and lacks a robust depiction of positive female representation. The narrative conveys a message; however, it fails to adequately represent its female characters.

When analysing both films through the lens of Indian and Western femininity, it becomes evident that *Barbie* exhibits a more vibrant and lively essence, while *The Kerala Stories* conveys a prevailing sense of darkness. Both can be substantiated based on the emotional contexts of the films. *Barbie* presents an image of innocence, while *The Kerala Stories* is enveloped in a sense of foreboding. Comparing both films presents significant challenges; therefore, a distinct analysis has been conducted for each. Given that both are the highest-grossing films, we can infer audience preferences regarding the types of films that attract more interest.

Limitations and Future Prospects

Given the limitations of time and resources at hand very limited sample was taken. Replication with a bigger and wider sample can help in generalizing the findings.

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