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FROM SUBMISSION TO ASSERTION: THE EVOLVING REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

The representation of women in Indian cinema has undergone a significant transformation over the last century. From early portrayals shaped by patriarchal norms and mythological archetypes to contemporary narratives driven by female agency, the journey reflects broader socio-political changes in Indian society. This article examines this evolution across historical phases, cinematic movements, and genres. Using the conceptual lens *from submission to assertion*, it explores how Indian films have transitioned from portraying women as passive subjects to active agents shaping their own stories. The portrayal of women in Indian cinema has been a dynamic and often contested space that mirrors broader socio-cultural shifts. As one of the most influential media in the country, Indian cinema not only reflects societal attitudes but actively participates in shaping them. The representation and construction of women's identity in films—whether progressive, regressive, or contradictory—plays a significant role in contributing to or resisting social change. This paper analyses the recent films based on this concept to reiterate the fact that Indian cinema is trying to come out of the conservative attitude to focus on women's representation and identity, oriented towards social change.

KEYWORDS: Indian cinema, gender, women, assertion, discrimination, culture, politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema, as one of the most influential cultural institutions in the country, has played a crucial role in shaping social attitudes toward gender. Historically dominated by patriarchal narratives, early representations of women largely reinforced ideals of obedience, sacrifice, and moral virtue. Over time, however, Indian cinema has witnessed a gradual but significant shift toward more assertive, self-aware, and autonomous female characters. This paper aims at examining the evolving representation of women in Indian cinema—from submissive archetypes to assertive agents—through a feminist and socio-cultural lens. Drawing upon select films from Hindi and regional cinemas, the study traces how changing socio-political contexts, feminist movements, and audience sensibilities have influenced cinematic portrayals of women. The paper argues that while contemporary Indian cinema increasingly foregrounds women's agency and resistance, these representations continue to negotiate entrenched patriarchal norms, revealing both progress and limitations.

Cinema in India has never functioned merely as entertainment; it is a powerful cultural discourse that reflects, constructs, and contests social realities. Among the many themes it engages with, the representation of women has been particularly significant, as it mirrors prevailing gender ideologies and power relations. For decades, Indian cinema portrayed women primarily through submissive roles—devoted wives, self-sacrificing mothers, and virtuous daughters—whose identities were defined in relation to men. These portrayals aligned closely with patriarchal social structures that valued female silence, endurance, and moral purity.

However, with socio-economic changes, the rise of feminist consciousness, and increasing participation of women as filmmakers and audiences, cinematic narratives have begun to evolve. Women on screen have gradually moved from the margins to the center, from passive sufferers to assertive individuals who question authority, articulate desire, and claim agency. This transformation has led to view how Indian cinema has reimagined womanhood over time. It is very clear that the cinematic representations within broader historical and cultural contexts, emphasize the dialectical relationship between cinema and society.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed primarily by feminist film theory, which critiques the ways cinema constructs gendered identities and sustains patriarchal

ideology. Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" is particularly relevant in understanding how women have been objectified and positioned as spectacles in mainstream cinema. Indian feminist scholars such as Shoma A. Chatterji and Lalitha Gopalan have further emphasized how local cultural norms intersect with cinematic practices to regulate female sexuality and agency. Ashish Rajadhyaksha has examined the politics of representation in Indian cinema and the ways in which it reflects and reproduces social hierarchies. His work, along with that of Wimal Dissanayake and Moti Gokulsingh, interrogates how mainstream Indian popular cinema tends to normalize caste, class, and gender hierarchies.

Additionally, this paper intends to draw the attention upon postcolonial feminist perspectives, especially those articulated by scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who caution against homogenizing women's experiences. This approach allows for an analysis sensitive to class, caste, region, and cultural specificity within Indian cinema. By integrating feminist and cultural studies perspectives, the paper examines representation not merely as reflection but as a site of ideological struggle.

1.2. *Women in Early Indian Cinema: Ideals of Submission and Sacrifice*

In the early decades of Indian cinema, particularly from the 1940s to the 1960s, female characters were largely constructed as embodiments of idealized womanhood. Films of this period often revolved around themes of family honour, marital duty, and moral righteousness, positioning women as custodians of tradition. Characters such as the long-suffering wife or the self-effacing mother were celebrated for their endurance and moral strength, even as they lacked autonomy.

Mythological and devotional films further reinforced submissive ideals by glorifying figures like Sita and Savitri, whose virtue was measured through sacrifice and obedience. Even when women were central to the narrative, their agency was circumscribed within patriarchal expectations. Transgression, when it occurred, was usually punished, reaffirming moral order. Thus, early Indian cinema functioned as a cultural apparatus that normalized gender hierarchy and valorised female submission.

1.3. *Transition and Turbulence: Women in Parallel and New Wave Cinema*

The emergence of parallel cinema in the 1970s and 1980s marked a significant departure from mainstream conventions. Influenced by realism and

socio-political critique, filmmakers began to explore women's lives with greater complexity and empathy. Films during this period portrayed women grappling with issues such as marital oppression, sexual exploitation, and economic dependency.

Female characters in parallel cinema were no longer idealized abstractions but socially situated individuals. They expressed anger, desire, and dissent, often challenging oppressive structures. While these films did not always offer liberatory resolutions, they foregrounded women's subjectivity and exposed the systemic nature of gender injustice. This phase represents a critical transitional moment, where cinema began to question rather than merely reproduce patriarchal norms.

1.4. Assertion and Agency in Contemporary Indian Cinema:

The liberalization of the Indian economy, globalization, and the rise of urban middle-class audiences significantly reshaped cinematic narratives from the 1990s onward. Contemporary Indian cinema increasingly features women who are educated, professionally ambitious, and emotionally self-aware. These characters assert their choices in matters of love, marriage, career, and sexuality.

Recent films foreground women as decision-makers rather than moral anchors. Themes such as consent, bodily autonomy, domestic violence, and female desire are explored with unprecedented directness. Regional cinemas have also contributed richly to this shift, offering narratives rooted in local realities while challenging gender norms. Women, though constitute half of the creation are never considered equal to men in the patriarchal world and their sensibilities were never taken into consideration either in the male-centered literature or hero-oriented films. Women are systematically marginalized in the name of Indian culture, tradition, and religion. Their roles are just confined to the dances, and as objects of beauty. Female-lead films can be counted on fingers and they are also made in a very unrealistic manner attributing heroic qualities to the heroine. But in the recent movies, the real pain and suffering of women is unveiled with the bold themes and bold decisions taken by the female characters. Some of the recent films are discussed here to represent the true identities of women and their transformation over a period.

2. THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN - THE LIBERATION OF THE KITCHEN QUEEN

"The Great Indian Kitchen" directed by Joe Baby, is an artistic representation of the struggles of women in Indian households. The film showcases the

repeated routine of women in kitchen and in the lives of their men, with little recognition from anyone.

The film starts with an aspiring dancer set up in an arranged marriage with a teacher. The entire film shows her life, the everyday drudgery of women and ultimately how she escapes the cycle. The primary setting of the film takes place in the family home of the man. The women in the house are supposed to cook, clean, dust and look after the entire household, without any aspirations or hobbies of their own. The mother-in-law of the female protagonist, has been living this routine without questioning the ways of her home. In the beginning, the audience see that the mother-in-law has walk the entire to corridor to and fro to give her husband his toothbrush with toothpaste already on it, so that he can go about his routine.

The screenplay shows two sides of the coin, where the women start making food early in the morning meticulously, while the men are seen reading newspaper and practising yoga. The women are expected to eat only after the men finish their food. The outrageous part that stands out in the film, which is very conveniently overlooked in real life homes is that, the men make a disgusting mess of the table after eating and do not clean up. The women are left to do this task as it is their 'duty'. But the men behave very differently in public places and in the presence of guests, which stand a sharp reference to the hypocrisy of ideals and the entitlement of patriarchal mindsets. The real endless cycle of chores starts for the lady when her mother-in-law leaves for abroad to take care of her pregnant daughter. The woman is left with an old kitchen, nitpicky father-in-law and an inconsiderate, entitled husband. The work in the house never ends. She is left with no time to even groom herself properly.

In the beginning of the film, the lady is seen wearing bright clothes and gold ornaments along with a smile. But as the film progresses, the clothes become duller in shades, all the ornaments are shed leaving the nuptial chain and the smile trapped somewhere behind uneasiness of the life she is made to lead. The shedding of the ornaments except the nuptial chain stand as a powerful symbol of shedding her happiness and self in the chain of responsibilities. And to the horror of the audience, the second bride of the 'husband' at the end of the film, is seen wearing the same kind of ornaments, starting with the same duties in the kitchen showing the endlessness of the cycle with no enlightenment in the men and by extension, the society whatsoever. The characters in the film do not have names and are addressed as 'husband' and 'wife'. This sends a striking message to the audience that, this film is not the story of a

particular family but it is the story of every family in general. The 'no name' factor also reinforces the gender roles deeply embedded into the society. These gender roles make sure that individuals refuse to look past the duties assigned and see others as humans.

At the outset, the chores performed by the women are just commonly performed, needless to think about activities but the taking of the film and the characterisation highlight the inherent struggle of the chore that women themselves fail to notice in many cases. In one scene of the film, the wife asks the husband if she could re heat the food from afternoon as too much is leftover, the husband says chapati is good for health. Here, the wife is forced to throw away food and make fresh food all over again. In another instance, the lady washes clothes using a washing machine but the father-in-law insists she washed it by hand, which increases her work. But the icing on the cake is, no one is ever satisfied by anything she does, they resort to look down upon women's work in the house and mocking them. This irritates the female protagonist.

Since the beginning of the film, a leaking faucet in the kitchen sink stands as a motif. It represents the cracks in that form in the relationship of the young couple. Along with the increase of the leak in the dirty faucet, the leak in the marriage too keeps getting worse. No matter how much the lady tries to mend it, her efforts remain futile as the man doesn't pay attention to the issue, just as he does in his marriage. The intimacy issues between the couple stand as the disturbing proof of this motif. The lady is not comfortable anymore and she asks for a little foreplay before intimacy only to be mocked and insulted by her husband who doesn't care for her emotional or physical needs. By the end of the movie, the lady throws this dirty water on her husband and it splutters on her father-in-law as well before leaving the house for good.

The movie also discusses the superstitions surrounding menstruation and the director cleverly linked it to the bigger Sabarimala temple issue. The father-in-law is an educated man and the 'husband' is a teacher but the family sees a woman's menstrual cycle as impure. Women are not allowed to touch anything in the house and make anything else impure; they are given a small space in a dingy old room. She is not even allowed to talk to the men following rituals to go to Sabarimala pilgrimage and in the background, the makers also focused on the issue of women's entry into the Sabarimala temple. At the end of the movie, when the lady walks away from this patriarchal house, she walks past several protestors holding placards and shouting slogans against women's entry into the temple issue. This

symbolically shows that she is walking past and breaking all kinds of stereotypes in her life as well as the society. She also understands that patriarchy and gender roles start from our own home. when she reaches her family home, her mother asks her to get some water for her brother. The lady cannot stand this anymore; she cannot see another gender role being rooted in the mind of a young boy and lashes out at her mother to teach the boy equality in chores as well as in spirit. The film ends with the cycle of events repeating in the 'husband's' house while the former 'wife' resumes her career as an empowered dance teacher, driving a car and taking agency of her life by herself.

Great Indian Kitchen, which is originally made in Malayalam in 2021, hit the patriarchal assumptions and presumptions in the contemporary setting. The identity of a woman as artificially attributed in the Indian male-lead societies and its impact on the women in the younger generation is articulated in this cinema. The film has drawn critical acclaim for its raw and unsettling portrayal of gendered oppression in the domestic space. It operates at the intersection of feminist cinema and subaltern storytelling, offering a powerful indictment of patriarchy entrenched in every day cultural practices. This cinema got rejected by mainstream distributors and hence released in OTT platform. This itself shows the indifferent attitude of the film distributors who are more concerned about the commercial successes by involving the popular heroes.

Great Indian Kitchen exposes how patriarchy operates not only through violence but through routine, ritual, and silence. Male characters are never overtly abusive but their dominance is systemic, invisible, and normalized. Many women can relate themselves with the wife in the cinema as they are expected to perform unpaid domestic labour without recognition or rest. Domestic work is shown as never-ending, thankless, and physically exhausting and unnoticed by men in the family. The protagonist, a young wife, is made to cook, clean and serve in silence while men eat, rest, and leave without acknowledgement. Kitchen becomes the symbol for the domestic imprisonment in which she must obey the rules and regulations imposed on her by men in the family. It is very ironical that women have been given the position of 'kitchen queens' but work as servants as per the choices of men in the family. The film critiques how "culture" and "tradition" are often euphemisms for female submission. Customs around menstruation, cooking, and servitude are used as to strip women of autonomy. No name is given to the female protagonist deliberately because she represents every other married woman in any Indian

household. So, the wife is a subaltern in the movie who is nameless, voiceless, invisible-both literally and metaphorically. The film is a practical answer to Spivak's question, "can the subaltern speak?" For most of the film, the subaltern cannot speak as she is silenced by culture, marriage, religion, and family. When she finally walks out to embrace the act of dancing, her favourite art form, it is not with confrontation but with dignified resistance- her first act of agency is simply choosing herself. The film ends with a suggestion by her to her mother who pampers the son. She pleads that the boys should also be brought up like girls, assigning domestic work so that they can understand the plight of the wives in married life and can share the work with them. *Great Indian Kitchen* is certainly an eye-opener to parents and the dominant men to understand that a woman's silence cannot be ignored and they should be given their space to realize their dreams and aspirations. The protagonist's decision to walk away from the household becomes a radical assertion of agency. The film critiques how tradition disguises subjugation and uses domestic space as a battleground for autonomy, making it a landmark in Indian feminist and subaltern cinema. The film has resonated with audiences, sparking conversations about gender roles, domestic labour, and the need for change in the attitude of men, society, and family in understanding the anguish of women who are destined to perform multi-tasking.

3. THAPPAD – A SLAP TO PATRIARCHY?

Domestic violence has been a boiling issue in the country for decades. India has travelled long battling with gender and identity issues. The veteran director Anubhav Sinha presents a new perspective on violence against women in a marriage with his thought-provoking film *Thappad – Bas itnisibaat?* The title thappad, in hindi means a slap. A husband's angry, impulsive slap towards to his wife forms the crux of the story. The veteran director Anubhav Sinha has masterfully brought out his finesse in storytelling and a fresh take on women's identity. The entire screenplay runs on the idea presented in the subtitle – *Bas itnisibaat?* which roughly translates to is that all?

The story starts with Amrita, a happy homemaker starting her day with chores. She juggles through the chores, taking care of her husband Vikram and tending to her mother – in – law with a practised ease. She meticulously attends to her husband's needs and becomes his strength when he needed assurance regarding his presentation. Her entire world turns upside down when her husband slaps her in a party, in a fit of rage. She starts questioning her dignity, her

identity and her place in that house and in his life. She waits for her husband to realise his mistake and apologise to her but he doesn't. She expects someone to talk to her and understand her plight, but to her dismay, everyone asks her to move on from the incident as if nothing happened. Amrita decides to move out of the place and divorce her husband. The rest of the film progresses with Amrita's journey through the divorce process fighting patriarchy, while standing her ground.

The director Anubhav Sinha has masterfully crafted every character in the film though the story revolves around the character of Amrita (played by Tapsee Pannu). All the characters in the film, at some point of the story, show patriarchal traits. While some characters have patriarchy embedded in their psyche, some are taught to live with it. The craft of the makers is visible in how distinct every character in the film is, though all of the characters represent or encourage the same idea without making the screenplay loud or dramatic.

Vikram, Amrita's husband, is the one of the central characters of the film. He appears to be a loving husband at the beginning of the film. He takes care of his wife, he respects her family, takes her out on dates, flirts with her and even asks for her advice before his important presentation. The viewers believe that he is a model person, but his every action later on, proves the contrary. He too belongs to the category of people who sneer at the sight of a successful woman. In the beginning of the film, he sees that his neighbour Shivani (played by Dia Mirza), who happens to be a single mother, drives an expensive car like his. She wishes him, before going to work. Vikram wonders and says, "*Ye kartikyahai?*" This proves that he either cannot accept a woman equally successful as him or he too believes that women take disrespectful means to get rich. When Amrita asks if she can learn car driving, he replies by asking her to learn to make parathas first, thus preventing her from independence and also showing her place in i.e. the kitchen.

When he is enraged that he is denied the position he was waiting for, in the company he works for, he loses his temper and gets into an argument with his boss in the party he hosted. His friend and Amrita's brother try to stop him but when Amrita tries to stop him from escalating the issue in rage, he slaps her in a burst of emotion shocking the guests present in the house. He does not realise that his action was wrong; on the top of it, he justifies the slap saying, "*It was just a moment.*"

He is more concerned about his image in the society than his wife's emotions. When Amrita

refuses to go back with him, he gangs up with his affluent, influential brother and stoops so low as sending her legal notices and petitions attributing all falsehood, besmirching her image. When Amrita tells him that she is pregnant, he is keen on bringing her back, not out of love. Fatherhood for him, is just another goal on a to-do list of priorities. By the time he realises his mistake and apologises to her, they are divorced and Amrita's decision is irrevocable.

Vikram's brother too stands as a patriarchal influence – by nature or to support his brother blindly, is not clear. When Vikram informs him about Amrita's decision to go forward with the divorce despite being pregnant with Vikram's child, he is not concerned about the 'legacy' of the family more than the mother.

Amrita's brother too is patriarchal in mindset. He tries to coax Amrita into going back to Vikram and 'save her home from breaking apart'. He is enraged when his girlfriend Swati questions him, is it only the woman's duty to 'save the house'. When he gets physical with her in anger, his father chides him to sense and asks to apologise. But his redemption arc is a ray of hope for the viewers. He apologises to Swati and vows to become a better man for her. This shows that if people dare to step past their pre conceived notions on women's life, redemption and a hope for a beautiful future is possible.

The women in the film too believe the generational teachings embedded in patriarchy. Amrita's mother and mother-in-law advise her to forget the incident and move on. In one scene, Amrita's mother says, "*Ghar sametkerakhnapadtahai ek aurat ko*", she further justifies her statement saying, for generations, women have been taught this and following the same. That's what is expected of a woman. After the slap, Amrita's Mother-in-law looks at the quiet, upset Amrita. Amrita expects her to understand the pain she is going through as a woman. But the elderly lady says, "*Jaane de beta, thodapardashkarnaseekhnachahiye.*"

Amrita approaches a highly successful activist lawyer, Netra for her appeal of divorce. Netra, though fights for women's rights and laws in the court, she is a victim of sexual harassment and constant derision at home herself. She says "*Just a slap then*". She asks Amrita to rethink her decision and divorces are not approved for a single slap. But what cracks Netra's perception is Amrita's firm stand, "*Nahi maar saktana*". This shows that women themselves don't think of a slap as a threat to identity.

While Amrita's slap at least sparked a discussion or two, her house-help Sunita's case was the entire opposite. Sunita is beaten up by her husband

everyday as she can't have children. She narrates it to Amrita like a daily soap story. Amrita and Vikram never pay much attention to Sunita. Sunita herself never thinks of her mistreatment as an issue to be considered. She is not aware of the fact that domestic violence is not acceptable. This taps at a Marxist perspective of the issue showing how class differences shape the life of women.

According to Anubhav Sinha, "It eventually boils down to who's getting the pay check." While this stands true, from a gender perspective, the argument might appear opposite to what he the director said. In the words of Eirich, "Scholars have argued that both husbands and wives are less satisfied if wives outearn their husbands because this violates the norms of the male breadwinner model." In the movie, Amrita is a home maker while Sunita is the bread winner of the family. Yet, both the women are subjected to abuse.

The director's vision of feminism in the movie is clear - Empowering but not man-hating. While, he showed various characters and forms of patriarchy through his characters, the film also contains characters like Amrita's father Mr. Sandhu and Swati who support Amrita in her battle of identity. Swati is Netra's assistant and one of the very few people who believe Amrita's pain is valid and legit. She introduces Amrita to Netra and supports her through the case ordeals.

Mr. Sandhu, Amrita's father, has been a progressive man from the beginning. He is a loving husband and a supportive father. He is deeply upset by his daughter getting slapped by her husband. He does not believe in his wife's views on women and family. He supports Amrita in her decision of divorce. He encourages her reminding that what is right may not be easy and she should not stop fighting.

Thappad, also serves as the finest example of showcasing a woman's pride and self-assertion. The consequences of slapping the wife in the public space and its telling impact on the psychological workings of individuals, the intervention of family and societal attributes are clearly demonstrated while focusing on the self-respect of a woman. The decision of getting divorce despite carrying the child becomes vital and speaks volumes about the agency and autonomy, and self confidence that a woman should carry and it reflects that a wife's responsibilities should not be carried out at the cost of her self-denial. The re-evaluation of marriage takes place by the wife after a single slap leading to assertion of self and reclaiming autonomy.

4. UYARE - THE RISE OF THE WOUNDED SELF TO THE SKIES

The Malayalam film *Uyare* directed by Manu Ashokan is a tale that speaks of the flight of a bird into the skies despite a broken wing armoured by determination and passion.

It is the story of Pallavi Raveendran, a vibrant career girl who dreams of becoming a pilot. Her dreams are shattered when she is attacked with acid by her toxic boyfriend, Govind Balakrishnan. She loses eyesight in one eye which results in her pilot's license being revoked. She files a court case against her attacker which thins Govind's job prospects and future. She is later hired as an air hostess by Vishal Rajashekharan, the son of an airline company's owner. When Govind boards the flight and finds her as the air hostess, he asks her to withdraw the case as it is affecting his future and also, he is forced to face the stigma that comes with it. Pallavi is angry and splashes his face with cold water. Govind later files a complaint against her and Vishal is forced to fire her. Govind attempts suicide when the court verdict turns out opposite in his favour. On the last day of her flight, the pilot collapses and Pallavi has to take charge. She makes a safe landing earning the cheers of all the passengers including Vishal's.

One of the important themes discussed in the film is the uninhibited ambition of a woman and her struggle to make it happen. The protagonist Pallavi is a confident woman who is clear about her dreams. She works hard to achieve them. Through the character of Pallavi, the director Manu Ashokan encourages the audience to not be scared to dream. This movie stands as an impressive attempt in establishing the fact that sky is the limit for those who dare to dream and make efforts to achieve them.

The movie also raises the question of whether being the subaltern in a relationship. Pallavi, in the beginning of the movie is in a relationship with Govind, a senior from her college. He is a toxic man who seeks the emotional dependency of his girlfriend on him just to boost his ego and snub the woman. When Pallavi fails to pick up his calls during a hectic training schedule, he slits his hand as a tactic of emotional blackmail. Pallavi rushes to see Govind. This toxicity in the relationship concerns Pallavi's father.

When Govind understands that Pallavi is fed up with his obsession, he shows up at her training accommodation in Mumbai, not to apologise or men his ways but to exhibit his ownership over her. He creates a scene in the night when Pallavi steps out to party with her co trainees and in a moment of total vexation, she breaks up with him. Unable to take 'no' for an answer, Govind throws acid on her face. This

incident not only disfigures her form but also her career. She Her eyesight is compromised in one eye. But the confidence from her father and also from Vishal make her stand strong. But this brings the audience to one of the basic questions, why is the woman's form considered so primal that attacks on women have always been targeted on the form. Acid attack as shown in the movie, molestation, humiliation, physical and digital blackmail, photo morphing and every other form of harassment targeted towards a woman focuses primarily on her form. This brings to the question asked by an emerging writer in Telugu, Ms. Kadali Satyanarayana, "*Why does everyone concentrate more on a bra strap peeking out than what a woman on the stage has to say? Is the woman's status so trivial that a bra strap has more credibility than her knowledge?*"

This movie also highlights the selfishness of a human. When Pallavi's father presses charges on Govind, his father requests Pallavi to take the charges back offering non sensical negotiations. To voice out her agony and as a proof of the horror inflicted on her, Pallavi removes her scarf and shows her scarred face. This makes the ex-lover's father retreat in silence. The real question that haunts the audience is, is the perpetrator's family so blind to the girl's trauma that they wished to secure their son's future or are they selfish in their pursuit of emotionally scarring the girl as an extension to the physical scar their son gave her?

If the first half of the film showed how toxic masculinity works, the second half of the film showed the other side of the coin - the empowering, true masculinity through the character of Vishal. Vishal remains a supportive, empowering presence in Pallavi's life, providing her the opportunity of working as an air hostess. He breaks the stereotype and beauty standards associated with air hostesses by hiring a victim of acid attack. He stands a firm believer of beauty of the soul more than the face. He proposes to Pallavi respectfully and accepts when she says she does not want to spoil the friendship they share, with grace. Though he is forced to sack her from the job, he proves to be one of her biggest cheerleaders. He helps the bird fly with a broken wing in a cruel world that is hellbent on cutting it off.

The movie ends on a positive note that beauty is not determined by the corporate standards or what the world thinks. True beauty lies in one's confidence, self-respect, and determination to fly high in life.

5. LAAPATAA LADIES - FROM THE LOST TO SELFHOOD

The Hindi film *Laapataa Ladies* directed by Kiran Rao is hailed as one of the best movies directed by a woman for women. It offers a rich and layered

exploration of subalternity within rural, patriarchal India, using humor and satire to expose deeply rooted structures of marginalization. Beneath its light tone, the film powerfully engages with voice, identity, and assertion among women who are socially invisible. The beauty of the film lies in the authenticity and realistic representation of faulty traditions and value systems.

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The film starts with the journey of two newly wed couples in a train. Deepak is travelling with his new bride and the other couple is the son of an influential politician, already accused of killing his first wife and his new bride. Both the brides wear the same traditional veil that covers their face totally. Upon reaching the station, Deepak, nudges his wife and gets down in a hurry, only to realise upon reaching home that he brought the wrong bride, Pushpa instead of his wife Phool Kumari. On the other hand, Phool gets down along with Pushpa's family, only to be creeped out by the man and runs away. She is sheltered by Manju Maai, a self-reliant lady who runs a tea stall in the station. Deepak starts searching for his beloved Phool and his family lets Pushpa stay for a little while with them when she says she cannot go back to her parents' place which might make her and her parents look disrespectful. Later it is revealed that Pushpa is Jaya. She wanted to study organic farming in Dehradun and Deepak's mishap of bringing her here is blessing in disguise for her. Phool learns to become stronger in the guidance of Manju Maai while retaining her softness, Deepak approaches the police officer, Shyam Manohar, in search of Phool. The police officer begins suspecting Pushpa and keeps an eye on her while Pushpa/ Jaya aids silently in the search for Phool. The story reaches its climax when the arrogant husband of Jaya's slaps her in front of the police officer, in the police station and the officer threatens the guy with domestic violence charges helping Jaya out of that jail called marriage. Jaya goes to pursue her education and Deepak successfully finds Phool and they reunite.

The traditional norms that are presented in the film show the subtle forms in which patriarchy took over the minds of people. Deepak is required to present a photo of Phool's to the police for her search, but he realises that the only photo he has of her is the one they posed for shortly after their wedding and her face is covered by a veil. While the veil is the catalyst for the drama that instigated the mismatch, it also shows the traditionally rooted values of patriarchy

that subjugates women even regarding their clothing choices.

The veil also covers the scope of a woman's awareness of the world just as it covers her eyes. When Manju Maai asks Phool, the name of the village she was supposed to go to along with Deepak, Phool stumbles. She is not aware of the particulars of the village except that its name resembles a flower. This leads Manju Maai calls out Phool for her ignorance when Phool says she is a wise girl who can do all household chores and can sing bhajans. Manju Maai questions Phool if she can go home without help. She says, "*Being a fool is nothing to be ashamed of, but feeling proud of being a fool is shameful.*"

She also calls out the abuse of women in marriages. She describes her own life saying she was beaten everyday by her drunk husband and son who justify themselves as they beat her because they own her and they have a right. She proudly asserts that, "*One day I decided to exercise my right as well,*" thus ending a cycle of violence. She initially refuses to have a dessert Phool made saying there is nothing sweet left in life her to have dessert but when she hears that Phool reached her home safely, she tastes the sweet she made with fondness and a profound satisfaction. She acts as the much-needed anchor to Phool before she started her life as a new wife.

Another breezy scene from the movie that hits a sharp nail against patriarchy is when Pushpa aka Jaya praises Yashoda, Deepak's mother for the tasty lotus stem curry she made, the older lady casually says, "*Who goes around praising food?*" This indicates the status and hard work of women being neglected so much that it shocks the lady when someone praises the food she made. It is also shocking for her when Pushpa suggests she make the curry for herself if Deepak and his father do not eat, she lets out a laugh saying, "*Should we cook what we like to eat?*" It suggests that women do not just lose their independence with marriage, but also their personality, interests and even their tastes, making them nothing more than machines working for the household, thanks to the ingrained patriarchy.

She further hopes and prays that when Phool returns, she becomes friends with Poonam, the co-sister. She further notes with a hint of sorrow that, "*Women get so tied up in their roles and responsibilities, they rarely become friends with each other*" This gently dismantles the age-old stereotype that a woman is a woman's biggest enemy. This manipulative statement is passed down through generations cleverly, thus making the statement true while the reality stands a stark contrast to what is said.

While the character of Phool Kumari blossoms under the care of Manju Maai who teaches her what independence and self-love look like, the character of Jaya stands as a lady who knows independence and is fighting for it.

Jaya is married to Pradeep despite her protests. She dreams of studying organic farming. Pradeep has a notorious reputation of killing his first wife and remarrying Jaya. He also extorts a large sum from her parents in the name of dowry. He is a woman beater and abuser. She finds it a golden opportunity when Deepak mistakes her to be Phool under the veil and follows Deepak to his village. There she lies to everyone saying her name is Pushpa. She grows dear to everyone in the family while maintaining her identity a secret.

However, the police sub-inspector Manohar has his suspicions on her. In one scene, she nearly slips when he calls her Jaya but covers it up saying she turned back to take her bangles she left on his desk.

Jaya quietly sends a money-order for her higher education and she encourages Poonam to continue her hobby of drawing. She comes up with an idea of making Poonam draw the sketch of Phool which ultimately helps the reunion of Phool and Deepak.

She is brave enough to stand up for herself and educated to point out the flaws in patriarchal systems. She encourages Poonam to draw, Yashoda to laugh and becomes a beloved member of the family. She is witty enough to cover up her tattoo which is noticed by no one except Manohar, given his sharp police wit. She finally gets her freedom from Pradeep, her abusive husband in an unexpected turn of events when sub-inspector Manohar secures her safety from an abusive marriage.

Jaya's situation represents many women of the country whose dreams have been perpetually challenged in the claws of tradition and marriage. But Jaya's character arc plants the seed of hope in the audience's mind that no matter how much challenged, a woman can achieve her dreams through determination, wit and perseverance.

While the character of the sub-inspector Manohar is hilarious at the outset as the pan-chewing, corrupt officer with dry humour, his character is multi-faceted. He is devoted in his search for Phool and the only person to suspect Jaya. He follows her through and through until he reaches the seed of the issue thus exposing Jaya's identity.

But his integrity as an individual shines when he threatens the arrogant Pradeep, using his police wit, that he will have to face the court if he doesn't leave Jaya and Manohar will personally ensure it himself to handcuff Pradeep. Manohar even refuses the gold

Jaya offers in gratitude saying "Study hard". The satisfied smile on his face after releasing Jaya shows his true motives.

The beauty of the film lies in the idea that feminism does not equal man-hating. The men in the film are portrayed as supportive and loving figures who show respect to their women. Deepak is a loving, pining husband, restless in search for Phool. He does not hesitate to provide shelter to Jaya for a few days despite the mishap.

Deepak's father too exclaims his annoyance of the system of veil or ghunghat saying, "This damn veil will be the end of me." Shyam Manohar too treats his lady staff with respect.

The film ends on a hopeful note with Jaya's farewell; the women are teary-eyed while wishing her good luck. Jaya and Phool have an emotional moment expressing gratitude to each other. Jaya is seen boarding a bus to her new college in Dehradun while Deepak and Phool embark on the journey of their new life happily.

6. THE LAST COLOUR: HEADING TOWARDS REGAINING THE LOST SELF

The Last Colour is yet another movie which portrays the horrible lives of Indian widows in Vrindavan and Benaras. It is directed by an Indian American chef Vikas Khanna. The cinema addresses the age-old taboo of widowhood, depriving the widow women of their rights and value of life. The politics of patriarchy and cultural restrictions that are imposed on widows are captured in this film in a very appealing manner. The poor flower-selling girl befriends with one of the widows and promises her to bring colour to their lives when she later denied to play Holy due to cultural restrictions. After 24 years the girl becomes an advocate and fights for societal reforms that would bring about rehabilitation of both street children and widows after she wins a case for trans women. The film kindles a hope for all the destitute women be it widows, orphans and transgenders.

7. SARA'S: BEYOND MOTHERHOOD: ASSERTING AGENCY IN A CULTURE OF EXPECTATIONS

As per many cultures, a mother is the most sacrificial and should be, forgetting her "self" and live up to the expectations of the family. She must go the extent of sacrificing her goals and career, to achieve the so-called noble motherhood. The people, and by extension mainstream cinema, believe that motherhood is a magical purpose bestowed upon women. But *Sara's* is a film which makes the audience to think about the readiness of a woman to

become a mother, to consider her body and mind too. Directed by Jude Anthany, the film is a good attempt at making the Indian audience understand that reproduction at the end of the day is a woman's choice. It is a compelling narrative that deeply interrogates the entrenched patriarchal norms surrounding marriage and motherhood. The film becomes a significant site to explore subalternity as gendered marginalization, where the female voice struggles for autonomy within cultural frameworks.

Sara's is basically the story of most Indian households but one that is rarely discussed, especially in mainstream cinema. Just as we have major and minor literatures, there is main stream cinema which focuses on the elevation of male characters as heroes and minor screens which focus on the women centric characters and their issues. This film is centered on a young modern woman, and how she is almost convinced to sacrifice her career and dreams when she gets pregnant. As an unconventional romantic comedy, the movie is a light-hearted take on how society and family pressurize young couples in matters concerning relationships, marriage, and pregnancy. This film tries to address the age old- conventions and common social stigmas but The central character in the movie is Sara who is very clear about her future and the career that she wants to focus on. From a very young age, from her schooling days itself, Sara was clear that she did not want to give birth. It is probably because of the predicament of women as mothers that she has seen while growing up as a female. Whenever she expressed her wish to not to have kids, people would be saying that she will be changing her decision over a period of time or when she becomes a married woman. But Sara is very determined and assertive to follow her mind rather than the artificially created identities of women by the societal norms and familial expectations.

Sara is an aspiring filmmaker and she dreams of having her name in the titles of the movie as the Director of the movie. when she meets Jeevan, who also has a very similar opinion about not wanting to have kids as he is exploited by his working sister to take care of her kids, literally playing the role of a baby-sitter, and fed up with the work of a baby sitter. They fall in love and get married. As fate would have it, Sara accidentally gets pregnant and her decision to keep the child comes at the cost of her dream of finally becoming a filmmaker. Even though the movie talks about a sensitive matter about a woman's right to embrace motherhood, it takes a light-hearted approach to make its point. This approach largely works because the message it tries to deliver never

gets preachy which comes as a breath of fresh air. The film is not intended to showcase motherhood as a burden but it allows one to introspect on the sacrifices women have to make to raise the kids. It also talks about how patriarchy has systematically and convincingly projected women as ideal wives and mothers and assigned the gender roles and it is a realization that these are the cultural constructions that raising kids solely a woman's job as the men are the providers of the family. This film has a relevant tale about woman's right over her body and to give birth.

Sara's also shines the spotlight on the discrimination of women in the film industry to drive out the idea that film industry is not exceptional when it comes to project women as Directors because it is believed that women cannot be the right people to direct a movie as they do not have enough knowledge and stamina. Male domination in the film industry never allowed women to be in the limelight as directors of the movies. Sara's strong desire is to become the Director and aspires to progress from an associate director to a director of the movie but no producer gives her an opportunity. From being turned down to direct her own script because of her gender to being told that her duty, like that of most women, is to eventually have kids and raise them, the film does not hesitate to address pertinent questions about marriage and motherhood without any negative take against motherhood. It is important to understand that the struggle of women with their dreams, are manifold, in real life. For being born as females, eventually they are guided by the patriarchal norms and traditions. Economic, cultural, socio-political, and economic status of women have utmost implications on women in performing their gender roles. The doctor says that parenting is also a kind of art and many people cannot perform it to the perfection. Firoz suggests that if Sara is not ready it is mere waste of thinking about it and she can focus on her goals.

Sara undergoes a lot of turmoil in taking a decision whether she must nurture her goal or nurture the kids that she is not interested in. She firmly says, "It's not that I don't like kids. I just don't have the knack of handling them, and it hasn't seemed essential to me," Sara tries to speak her mind. Her intention is very clear when she states, "For me, a person's ultimate aim should be to contribute something by which the world can remember you after you die, not just to have kids and be remembered by them." The dominant social discourse in India leans heavily towards the view that those who do not wish to be parents are selfish and/or avoiding responsibilities.

This school of thought holds that becoming a mother is a higher calling than any other, and that reproducing is the duty of women and men. Sara proves that women must be selfish at times to achieve their success and progress further towards their goals.

8. PERSISTING CONTRADICTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Despite noticeable progress, the representation of women in Indian cinema continues to be shaped by patriarchal constraints. Item numbers, objectification, and stereotypical tropes coexist with narratives of empowerment. Moreover, assertive female characters are often confined to urban, upper-middle-class settings, marginalizing rural, Dalit, and working-class women's experiences.

The tension between tradition and modernity remains a recurring motif. While women may assert independence, they are frequently expected to reconcile autonomy with familial conformity. Thus, cinematic assertion often operates within negotiated boundaries, reflecting the complexities of social change in India.

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9. CONCLUSION

The journey from submission to assertion in the representation of women in Indian cinema reveals a dynamic interplay between cultural continuity and transformation. Cinema has moved beyond monolithic portrayals of womanhood, embracing plurality, resistance, and agency. Yet, this evolution is uneven and incomplete, marked by contradictions that mirror societal realities.

By tracing this trajectory, the paper underscores the importance of feminist critique in evaluating cinematic narratives. Indian cinema, as a site of cultural production, holds immense potential to challenge gender hierarchies and imagine more equitable futures. Continued critical engagement is essential to ensure that assertion on screen translates into meaningful representation and social change.

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