

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW
MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES**
[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 4 | Issue 1
2021

© 2021 *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.ijlmh.com/>

Under the aegis of VidhiAagaz – Inking Your Brain (<https://www.vidhiaagaz.com>)

This Article is brought to you for “free” and “open access” by the International Journal of Law Management & Humanities at VidhiAagaz. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Law Management & Humanities after due review.

In case of **any suggestion or complaint**, please contact Gyan@vidhiaagaz.com.

To submit your Manuscript for Publication at **International Journal of Law Management & Humanities**, kindly email your Manuscript at submission@ijlmh.com.

Bollywood's Toxic Masculinity: The Problematic Portrayal of Men & Women in Popular Hindi Cinema

SAURABH SAMRAAT¹

ABSTRACT

Bollywood or the Hindi Film Industry went through different trends in the last 70 years. After the 60s, problematic themes started being presented, which led to far-reaching negative implications. Subsequent decades of the 70s, 80s, 90s and 2000s followed with their own problematic themes. In the present decade, we have witnessed the release of many pseudo-progressive movies, which although claims to be progressive, do not give women their due part. Theories like the Social Cognitive Theory and the Cultivation Theory provide us with enough evidence to show how such a problematic portrayal affects the audience. Male domination in the industry remains the prominent cause of such a portrayal. Among these problematic movies, some really progressive movies are breaking this stereotypical, sexist, toxic, and misogynist spell of Bollywood. Production of such films, when clubbed with social initiatives, can potentially remedy the wrongs done by years of problematic cinema produced by Bollywood.

The Bollywood or the Indian Hindi movie industry is the biggest film industry in India and one of the greatest entertainment industries in the world. Consistently, this industry produces a large number of motion pictures, which are exported to different places in the world. This humongous viewership of Bollywood films brings about similarly gigantic sociological, psychological, and cultural effects on its audience worldwide. Through this essay, we will analyze how the majority of the films delivered by this industry have been problematic and how these problems endure in the business even after a series of evolution that took place in the industry in the previous seven decades. This exposition will likewise demonstrate how Bollywood's reel life influences the real life of its tremendous base of audience, what are the causes of such banal portrayal, and what is the way forward.

When India became independent, the newfound ideals of equality and non-discrimination were held in high regard. Bollywood displayed the aspirations and ideals of the independent,

¹ Author is a student at Jindal Global Law School, India.

sovereign India, crossing the barriers of class and gender equality to reach an idealistic society. Inspiring movies like *Mother India* (1957) and *Pyaasa* (1957) are the perfect examples of the cinemas of this time. After a decade of this aspirational and inspirational cinema, the Industry shifted its course and started depicting the practical reality of the society, often exaggerating and glorifying the negative aspects of it to earn more audience. The imminent patriarchy became the forefront of the Hindi cinema of the 60s and 70s and the trend of “Angry Young Man” dominated this era. Actors like Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra were constantly fighting off villains and saving their mother, sister, lady love, or wife on screen. Blockbusters like *Sholay* (1975) glorified men who were tough, aggressive, rowdy and ‘masculine’ enough to fight off villains. Exactly the same films relegated female characters to the part of Damsel in Distress or to the role of nurturing mother or obedient spouse. This mother figure was regularly indicated going through insults and mistreatment in dutiful quietness, who were protected and saved in the end by the male protagonist. This kind of portrayal transforms into peer pressure compelling men and women to fit in this stereotypical mould presented by films, which further affects people’s mental health.

There was little change in this toxic narrative in the decade of the 80s and the little change that there was, it was often for the worse. The hypermasculinity of men and the damsel in distress syndrome of women’s portrayal gave rise to perhaps the most problematic themes in Bollywood: the utilization of sexual violence as a plot device. It exhibited how the male protagonist witnessed the sexual assault, or rape, or attempted rape or subsequent death of his sister, lady love, or some other distressed female in his life and how he avenges the villain, drawing a larger than life picture of the hero. The female lead’s character was tapered to a one-dimensional character whose whole presence is via the mercy of either the villain or the protagonist.

During the era of the 90s, India was experiencing the disruptions brought by different waves of feminism across the world. Ladies started leaving their homes to follow their aspirations. The force dynamic started moving in the public eye, particularly in the working class. Bollywood portrayed this change in the most perplexing manner conceivable. The female lead of this time was freed in that she had an occupation that paid her well; however, she needed to depend on the help of men to get what she needed. *Mohra* (1994), featuring Suniel Shetty, Raveena Tandon, and Akshay Kumar is the paradigm of such depiction. Raveena Tandon assumed the part of *Roma*, a journalist. Even an accomplished and educated character such as Roma was relegated to a damsel in distress. Ironically, what her character is remembered today are for the two dance numbers, including one where she squirms in a wet

yellow sari in the rain. This decade also saw the ascent of comedy in films as actors like Govinda took over. This new aspect of comedy brought with itself the trivialization of women, gays, and transsexual individuals. They were diminished to mere punchlines as gendered comments and sexist jokes transformed into the devices of comedy relief. Social problems borne out of the patriarchal structure of society such as extramarital affairs were trivialized and normalized as well by using them as punchlines. *Biwi Number One* (1999), in which Salman Khan plays the role of cheating husband, spreads internalized misogyny among women by blaming the girlfriend for the affair instead of the husband. Movies of this period also normalized stalking as an acceptable form of conveying romantic interest by the protagonists. A new genre of family films, consisting of movies such as *Hum Saath Saath Hai* (1999) and *Hum Apke Hain Kon* (1994) started making consistent appearances in theatres. The issues with such films were that they reinforced gender stereotypes as the female leads in such films were by and large housewives whose life pivoted around men, lacking agency of their own.

As Bollywood was entering the 2000s, the western trend of Prince Charming entered the Hindi film industry with films like *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) by entertainers like Shah Rukh Khan, which attempted to change the hypermasculine picture of Bollywood men but it still gave no agency to the woman for the decisions pertaining to her life or body. We also see the evolution of the saviour complex in this decade, as protagonists shifted from saving heroines from real villains to abstract impediments. Movies like *Vivah* (2006) and *Veer Zara* (2004) celebrated men for being noble enough to accept women in spite of whatever "tyranny" the women had experienced, be it deformed looks or citizenship of an enemy nation. The age-old stigmas of queerphobia and homophobia are also reflected in movies of this decade. For example, Hijras are relegated to caricatures who dance on events, creating a cliché picture of Hijras. The film *Nayak* (2001) has a scene where the offensive Hindi word "chhakka" is used to deride a Hijra or transwoman. The gay community too, was ridiculed by using their sexuality and identity as punchlines like in *Dostana* (2008) and *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003).

As we'll enter the present decade post-2010, we will see a shift in the nature of the portrayal overall. This decade witnessed many pseudo-progressive films that claimed to change the previously set gendered stereotypes but instead of women discovering and advancing themselves, within it was always a man who was pushing women to cross the stereotypical boundaries of the society, creating an image that only men can 'liberate' women. Movies like *Dangal* (2016), *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017), *Mission Mangal* (2019), etc. being classic

examples of it. In general, even the women-oriented movies had embedded casual sexism in them as we can see Akshay Kumar's character *Rakesh Dhawan* jokes "women" in the movie *Mission Mangal* when Vidya Balan's character proposes the idea for Mars Mission via cooking. However, the classic old misogyny isn't completely dead either. In the *Pyar ka Panchanama* series (2011, 2015) and the movie *Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety* (2018), men are shown being fed up with women and their mannerisms, thus showing women in an irrational, demanding, and unreasonably negative fashion. However, the leading tale of misogyny and toxic masculinity still remains Shahid Kapoor starrer *Kabir Singh* (2019) where *Kabir* is portrayed having a supreme sense of authority over his girlfriend, who even slaps her if things don't go according to him. The problematic characters such as *Kabir* who have no regard for the consent of women creates the wrong example of how men should behave as the normalization of such toxic behaviour creates a sense of acceptance for such men in real life.

The pervasive impact of such a hazardous portrayal disrupts the real lives of common people to an immense extent. It influences the manner in which individuals see others and in particular, themselves. Manyfold research has been done in this direction. For instance, the Social Cognitive Theory advocates that while devouring media, individuals create desires and set standards for their real lives after observing the social constructions in the media. (Hall et al., 2012). Through a 2009 research which was based on the analysis of the portrayal of intimate relations in superhit rom-coms, authors Holmes and Johnson substantiated the Social Cognitive Theory when they ascertained that individuals "look to relationships presented in the film to learn what to expect from real-life relationships". Bussey and Bandura (1999) stated that the comprehension of one's gender development, gender advancement and self-conception is heavily influenced by our societal observations, prescribed by societal gender-typing which in turn is also influenced by the media that we consume. Rather than giving both men and women reasonable portrayals in the media, they are often represented in a hyper-conventional fashion, which asserts generalizations of character attributes, aspirations, and abilities (Bussey and Bandura, 1999). They also argue that the perception of gender roles and gendered qualities that we attribute to different sexes isn't restricted to one particular period of life, rather it is consistently affected by social components throughout the life of both genders. Likewise, the Cultivation Theory uncovers that portrayals of different ideas in media influence the audience's perception of reality, though unreceptively. It propositions that constant exposure to specific social messages will impact how we relate to such messages in the long haul (Eyal et al., 2014). Considering the vast base of Bollywood's viewership, it is certain that numerous individuals in our society are receiving numerous such

themes and messages through various genres of Bollywood films, which goes on to influence the individual as well as the society. The classic example of how these theories affect people in real lives will be the numerous cases registered in police stations across India, in which people claim to be inspired by certain Bollywood movies to commit specific crimes.

Now let's try to understand the biggest potential cause of this problematic portrayal. Although many, the biggest cause of such portrayal is the male-domination in the Bollywood industry. Due to the lack of women's involvement, the movies produced in this industry have mostly been reduced to being a by-product of male domination and the male gaze. This explains why the bodies of female actors and dancers are hyper-sexualized and objectified in Hindi movies, most often by means of “item” songs and their derogatory lyrics. Interestingly, even the linguistic design of the word “actress” is sexist, as the suffix “- ess” denotes that the roles of actresses differ from actors (Simonton, 2004). While not purposefully malignant, this little contrast points to the inalienable sexual discrimination in film industries across the globe, including Bollywood. Discrimination theory draws itself from the concept that “members of a certain group are preferred, even when the work of these group members is indistinguishable from that belonging to another group” (Lauzen, 2012). By discerning, and preferring, male actors over female actors, Bollywood shows its discriminatory propensities, which are completely evident in the issues of unequal pay on the basis of sex or the lack of women directors in the industry. As indicated by a 2017 report by the Geena Davis Institute, only one of every ten directors in Bollywood are women. It also reveals that the screen time for female actors was a mere 31.5 percent, against the 68.5 percent enjoyed by male actors. (Deshmukh, 2020) Additionally, considering the disproportionate ratio of ladies when contrasted with men in key off-screen jobs, for example, production, script-writing, camera management. Film-making and direction, it becomes clear that the female characters on screen have been made functional by the male perspective, resulting in the perpetuation of the age-old stereotypes and gender biases that prevail today in Bollywood. That is the reason, no matter movies of which decade we talk about, most of them fail to pass the Bechdel test² as if the life of the women as portrayed by Bollywood has nothing but men in it.

That being said, there were films in every decade that challenged this stigmatized portrayal. For example, *Badnam Basti* (1971) got released in the 70s when homosexuality was considered a disease. Although it got absolutely no credit or recognition, it was a radical step for its time. Be it *Sadma* (1983), *Chandni* (1989) and *Fire* (1996), or *Margarita with a Straw*

² Cambridge Dictionary defines Bechdel Test as “a way of judging whether a film, book, etc. shows women as equal to men, by asking whether it includes a scene in which two women discuss something other than a man.”

(2014), *Queen* (2013), *Aligarh* (2015), *Pink* (2016), *Kapoor and Sons* (2016), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan* (2020), etc. there always have been some films which provided us with a beam of hope to pass the dark tunnel of Bollywood that it is. However, choosing progressive movies over the problematic ones shouldn't be the only course of action as the problem runs deeper than that. The problematic movies earn profits in crores because the banal attitudes shown in the movies are our practical reality at least on some level. The exaggerated depiction of this reality gets accepted and is often enjoyed because we already are comfortable with reality. After a certain time, this consistent exaggeration then starts adding on to the prevalent reality, further disrupting the society. It's a vicious cycle. In order to break this cycle, society as a whole need to bring real-life transformations in our practical reality, at the same time choosing progressive movies over problematic ones.

To conclude, there have been numerous genres in Bollywood, but all these genres have one thing in common, and that is men. Men who are not only heterosexual but also heteronormative enough to fit the stereotypical definition of 'masculinity.' No matter which decade, Bollywood has shown men to have absolute agency over women thereby re-institutionalizing the already established patriarchy of Indian society. Women are also mostly shown in the same heteronormative fashion, thereby limiting them to certain 'nurturing' roles. This patriarchy, stereotyping, and heterosexual monopolization of the whole industry hit the men and women from all fields of life in the aforementioned ways, which are substantiated with research. The self-transformation of the society, coupled with the release of more progressive movies, can potentially remedy years of damage that Bollywood has done to individuals and society. All in all, it's high time for the Kabir Singh of film industries, i.e. the Bollywood to abandon its toxic masculinity, else Preeti, i.e. the society must reject him and move on to better alternatives.

REFERENCES:

1. Advani, Nikhil, dir, *Kal Ho Na Ho*. 2003, India.
2. Bahl, Vikas, dir, *Queen*. 2013, India.
3. Barjatya, Sooraj, dir, *Hum Apke Hai Kon*. 1994, India.
4. Barjatya, Sooraj, dir, *Vivah*. 2006, India.
5. Batra, Shakun, dir, *Kapoor and Sons*. 2016, Coonoor, Tamil Nadu, India.
6. Bose, Shonali, dir, *Margarita with a straw*. 2015, India.
7. Bussey, K., & Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development and Psychological Review, 206(1), 676–713. DOI: 10.1037/0033-295x.106.4.676
8. Chopra, Yash, dir, *Chandini*. 1989, India.
9. Chowdhury, Aniruddha R., dir, *Pink*. 2016, India.
10. Deshmukh, Snigdha. 2020. “Women and Indian Cinema-A Tale of Representation.”, *The MIT Post*, Jan, 20.
11. Dhawan, David, dir, *Biwi No.1*. 1999, India.
12. Dutt, Guru, dir, *Pyasa*. 1957, India.
13. Eyal, K., Raz, Y., & Levi, M. (2014). Messages about sex on Israeli television: Comparing local and foreign programming. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 58(1), 42-58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2013.875021>
14. Hall, P., West, J., & McIntyre, E. (2012). Female self-sexualization in MySpace.com personal profile photographs. *Sexuality & Culture*, 16(1), 1-16.
15. Johar, Karan, dir, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*. 2001, India.
16. Kapoor, Prem, dir, *Badnam Basti*. 1971, India.
17. Kewalya, Hitesh and Rohit Sharma, dir, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*. 2020, India.
18. Khan, Mehboob, dir, *Mother India*. 1957, India.
19. Lauzen, M. M. (2012b). Where are the film directors (who happen to be women)? *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 29(4), 310–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509201003601167>
20. Mahendra, Balu, dir, *Sadma*. 1983, India
21. Mansukhani, Tarun, dir. *Dostana*. 2020, India.

22. Mehta, Deepa, dir, *Fire*. 1996, India.
23. Mehta, Hansal, dir, *Aligarh*. 2015, India.
24. Rai, Rajiv, dir, *Mohra*. 1994, India.
25. Ranjan, Luv, dir, *Pyaar Ka Punchnaama 2*. 2015, India.
26. Ranjan, Luv, dir, *Pyaar Ka Punchnaama*. 2011, India.
27. Ranjan, Luv, dir, *Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety*. 2018, India.
28. Shakti, Jagan, dir, *Mission Mangal*. 2019, India.
29. Shanmugam, Shankar, dir, *Nayak: The Real Hero*. 2001, India.
30. Singh, S. Narayan, dir, *Toilet-Ek Prem Katha*. 2017, India.
31. Sippy, Ramesh, dir, *Sholay*. 1975, Ramanagara.
32. Tiwari, Nitesh, dir, *Dangal*. 2016, India.
33. Vanga, Sandeep, dir, *Kabir Singh*. 2019, India.
