ACTION SPEAKS LOUDER:

An Analysis of the Forms of Female Subordination in Bollywood Action Movies

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Introduction

Cinema is a popular art form that is frequently referred to as a powerful medium for educating people and spreading information about numerous cultures and practices worldwide (Sherak, 2011). Notions such as patriarchy, gender bias and male domination which have been pre-existing in the society are represented and validated through cinema. A majority of women characters are misrepresented onscreen with inappropriate attribution of status and derogatory labelling. This study addresses the problematic depiction of women and in Bollywood action movies in particular, and how female characters are still misrepresented and kept within the stereotypical boxes formulated by the patriarchal society. In order to demonstrate this misrepresentation and its roots in patriarchy, I have conducted an in-depth analysis of two films drawn from the Bollywood action genre.

Literature Review

In this section, I look at the work of postcolonial feminists and film critics and look at the journey and evolution of the representation of female characters in Bollywood cinema. Female characters have been stereotyped in gender confining roles since the beginning of cinema and when it comes to action movies in particular, Bollywood is still limited to the old ideas and beliefs of multiple societies that action movies are genres for men and by men (Tere, 2012). Women's roles are limited to being a damsel in distress or the love interest of the main lead, with no significance given to their life journeys or struggles. These gender issues are not limited to on-screen but off-screen as well. Very few women are working behind the cameras, and those who do are not given equal respect and pay as compared to their male counterparts. Not only are there no female directors when it comes to Bollywood action movies, but female editors, writers, photographers, and technicians are almost never

mentioned while discussing inadequate payment and other difficulties they face, simply because of their gender (Kaushal, 2021). Talking about this issue, Bollywood actress Lara Dutta said, "there is a need for more women to get associated with the business side of showbiz" (Rawal, 2022). Women are written by male directors, which causes an unrealistic representation of women. This section looks at all these issues, along with the issues of ageism, unequal pay, and how women are still being misrepresented in cinema, as shown in the sexualized representations of female dancers and actresses in Bollywood item songs.

Since its establishment in the 1930s, Bollywood, the Indian cinematic industry, has been one of the most profitable sources of mass entertainment in the world. Even during the time of the pandemic when the world had come to a standstill, Statista Research Department indicated that the economic value of the industry in 2020 was a staggering 183 billion Indian rupees (Basuroy, 2021). Indian cinema has been the world's largest producer of films since 2007. In the year 2018, the Indian film industry produced over 1,800 movies (Basuroy, 2021).

While Indian cinema has been economically successful and prolific, there have been issues with the content. The relationship between Indian cinema and the representation of female characters represents one such issue. In the context of evolution in the roles of women in Indian films, Laxmi (1991) writes, "From the passive wife of Dadasaheb Phalke's '*Raja Harishchandra*' to the long-suffering but heroic mother-figure of '*Mother India*' to the liberated single-parent of '*Mother '98*,' it has been a rather long and challenging journey for women in Hindi cinema" (p. 26). Laxmi has showcased the murky road of female representation in Indian cinema and its evolution over time in just one sentence. It was not easy for women to enter Bollywood during the time of its inception, and they had to fight their way through the patriarchal constraints put on them by the society.

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Women were reluctant to act in the early days of cinema because of the stigma attached to public performance. Acting, singing, or dancing in front of an audience was associated with prostitutes and courtesans and thus fell outside the bounds of proper society (Ganti, 2004, p. 114). The socio-cultural context in which women began acting in films conditioned the roles that were assigned to them; their film roles had to conform to the existing socio-cultural realities of women and their real-life roles. Bollywood film heroines were often represented as characters who primarily serve household and domestic duties (Sharpe, 2005). By upholding these family values, they aligned with Sita/Savitri trope. The Sita/Savitri image is a theme described by scholars in which "Sita is representative of a virtuous wife, whereas suffering Savitri who rescues her husband from death are all part of the preparation for suffering in the roles of wives and mothers" (Gupta, 2015, p. 109).

Other than portraying women as ideal wives and mothers, the other popular portrayal was of the exact opposite characterization, that of a vamp: "She flouts tradition, seeks to imitate Western women…drinks, smokes, visits nightclubs, is quick to fall out of love…portrayed as a morally degraded person…unacceptable for her behaviour… punished for it" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004, p. 79). Bollywood cinema delineated the characters of the heroines and vamps in strict compartments, having specific traits: heroines were pure, and vamps were impure. Heroines were mostly upper-class Hindus and Muslims from India, but vamps were of mixed heritage; the preference was for fair-skinned women who piqued the interest of Indian males (Kishore, 2014). It's no surprise that Cuckoo, the popular vamp in the 1940s and 1950s, was Anglo-Indian. Faryal, a 1960s vamp, was of mixed Indian and Arabic ancestry, and Helen, the most popular vamp of the 1960s and 1970s, was of Anglo-Burmese ancestry. She portrayed a sexy stripper, a vamp, a cabaret dancer at a bar, and so on. Helen was always thought to be best suited for the vamp role and had never played a heroine or the main female lead. As a result, the stigma associated with the vamp appears to impact the careers of

actresses in the industry (Kishore, 2014). As time progressed, so did the representation of women in cinema and the most significant reason was the widespread acceptance of feminism in India.

While the women's movement is a much earlier phenomenon, the term Feminism is relatively contemporary. Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural, and political movements, theories, and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women (Mohanty, 2003). The first wave was in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily concerned with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the right to suffrage (Phillips, 2004**).** The second wave was in the 1960s and 1970s, when protests were centred around women's inequality not only in the context of women's political rights but in the areas of family, sexuality, and work. The third wave of feminism extends from the early 1990s (Pande, 2018) and has been followed by a fourth wave.

Since the 1960s, as more and more women's issues came to the forefront of the patriarchal Indian society due to the familiarity with the concept of feminism, the more varied women's roles became in Indian cinema. However, does variation necessarily eliminate the typicality of roles? First, while many films have been made on social themes in the realm of women's issues, including dowry, widowhood, rape, etc., such as *Daawat-e-Ishq* (2014), *Lajja* (2001), and *The Last Color* (2019), it is not necessarily the case that any of these films have been blockbusters, neither have they been popularly viewed. Second, as Butalia (1984) says, such films only take a superficial interest in women and their issues (p. 109). This means that although they deal with social issues pertaining to women, the films do not focus on the women's points of view but rather on how the man plays the hero in these situations and fixes them. Even though cinema moved on from typecasting women as housewives and vamps, it did not necessarily go in the direction of the accurate portrayal of women. Cinema is still heavily influenced by patriarchy and its ideas and concepts.

Reflecting Patriarchal Social Views in Cinema

Patriarchy is a term that refers to men's dominance over women through social, cultural, political, and economic institutions. Much of today's debates about gender relations requires an understanding of patriarchy (Stacey, 1993). Scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir proposed during the first wave of feminism that patriarchy makes gendered inequalities natural (Beauvoir, 1952). Patriarchy has permeated social institutions, as evidenced by how gender is handled. Hence, Judith Butler has argued for undoing gender, translating into a dismantling of patriarchal structures (Butler, 2004). In recent times, the term "toxic masculinity" has gained a high level of momentum, especially post the #MeToo movement. Toxic masculinity is used as an umbrella term for male-perpetrated violence, misogyny, and sexism (Chaudhuri, 2020).

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined broadly as a set of gender norms and conventions validated by social structures in a specific context (Chaudhuri, 2020). According to Raewyn Connell, these norms legitimize men's dominance over women in various ways through patriarchy (Connell, 1995,p. 74). By pointing toward the problematic portrayal of men, it shifts the discourse of "blaming women for men's self-harm" toward the seamless amalgamation of toxic and hegemonic masculinity (Dowd, 2010).

Indian society, like a number of 'classical' societies, is still patriarchal. In the Indian society, a statement like "home and childcare taste sweeter to women while business and profession taste sweeter to men", has for a long time been receiving an unquestioned social approval. Women's roles have been largely restricted by socio-cultural norms to childbearing and child rearing, as well as household chores, and women are not expected to work outside the home (Sivakumar, 2021). Men and masculinity pass as the norm, but women and girls are

the "gender" that needs protection and control. Men in the society are expected to become "protectors" of and "providers" for their families (Dagar, 2002). This idea of society which sees women as weak and in need of protection also reflects in the portrayal of women on screen.

The stereotypes through which Bollywood portrays female characters—as damsels in distress, the responsibilities of male characters, a pawn between the hero and villain, or mothers/grandmothers instilling Indian values and religion in their children—reflect Indian society's perceptions of women's social positions and are reflective of Indian culture, traditions, and beliefs. Furthermore, the Indian cultural belief that men are superior to women is exemplified in films (Mehta, 2019).

Women in India have been breaking gender stereotypes and entering male-dominated industries, including advertising, IT sector, civil services, armed forces, and police (Nath, 2000). A survey by Budhwar, Saini, and Bhatnagar (2005) showed that Indian women were leaving their homes to fulfil their life goals. More recently, the 2011 census published by the Government of India shows that more than 35% of women are employed (Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011). Women in India have also been fighting for a bill that would reserve 33% of seats in Parliament for women (Coleman, 2013). During a time when women are fighting for their rights and are not afraid to walk toe to toe with the male-centric society, is the Indian film industry's portrayal of women showcasing this development? Are Bollywood films representing these changing social trends? These questions are worth exploring.

Movies like *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Devdas* (2002), which have been a commercial success worldwide, portray women as the driving force behind the actions of the male lead. The male lead is driven to the likes of alcohol, violence, and illicit affairs due to the rejection by the female lead. Female characters are not only portrayed as the driving force behind the

wrong decisions of the male lead, but in the end, they take them back even after all they have done in the name of love. For example, Kabir Singh's female lead character Preeti, who was a well-educated woman, engages in a toxic relationship with the main lead Kabir. Kabir slaps and abuses her, and she happily accepts him back into her life at the end of the movie, which validates the belief that women are the "gatekeepers of male desire" that absolve men of their aggression (Dowd, 2010).

In the movie *Baazigar* (1993), even though both the female and male lead are studying in the same college, the father chooses Ajay as his successor rather than his equally qualified daughter. The lack of advancement in women's actual social positions is reflected in films; women's abilities in the workplace or as intellectuals with opinions and voices are overlooked in society and movies. The importance of a woman is determined by her familial responsibilities, utility to men around her, and entertainment value. Women's issues are not limited to on-screen portrayal but off-screen as well. Talking about this issue, actress Konkona Sen said, "Where are the women behind-the-scenes? Other than the hair, costumes to an extent, editors, some assistants, female DOPs, and sound engineers are very rare. There still aren't many women behind the screens" (News18, 2017). Women are still vitiated and subordinated by the nationalist patriarchy and sexist film industry (Virdi, 2003).

Evolution of Female Representation in Bollywood

In a male-centric industry with so few women working in a position of power, it is only fair to assume that the representation of women onscreen by male directors and other male professionals will have gender biases and constraints that might not explore the real issues faced by women. A study conducted on the percentage of females in Head of Department roles across the sector of direction, writing, cinematography, editing, and

production design in Bollywood by Ormax Media and digital platform Film Companion found that women held 8% of the head of department (HOD) roles in Indian films in 2019 and 2020 (Laghate, 2021). Anupama Chopra, a film critic who was also a part of this study, stated that it was shocking to see that men head 92% of all key departments. Women's roles onscreen are frequently the male director's idea of what roles women should play. This idea is based on the director's beliefs, attitudes, and values and what the director believes viewers want to see (Gunjan, 2014).

The first female director who tried to enter the world of the controversial portrayal of women in India was a Canadian Indian filmmaker, Deepa Mehta. Her films *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005), which included some Bollywood actors though they were not produced within the industry, created public outrage upon release because of the representation of the women characters, who were utterly non-conforming to existing patriarchal social norms. The movie deals with issues like homosexuality and widow remarriages which were frowned upon in India. The movie focuses on women and their quest for freedom and free will, which did not sit well with the patriarchal society of India. Commenting on this issue, actress Anushka Sharma in an interview with Anupama Chopra stated that "patriarchy is ingrained in the minds of people in Bollywood and the society, and it is difficult for them to accept a woman with guts. The sole purpose of actresses is to look good and act within the patriarchal conformities of the society" (Chatterjee, 2015).

Fire (1996) is the story of two women married into the same family in heterosexual marriages. However, their marriage is void of any love and affection, and it pushes them to develop a love relationship with each other. The portrayal of women as making this decision infuriated political parties, religious groups, and religious fanatics, who went around threatening to kill the director and smashing and destroying theatres and cinema houses that dared to show the film. The film was banned from screening in Mumbai and the entire state

of Maharastra (Nandakumar, 2011). The two main female leads were named Sita and Radha, who are critical mythological characters in Indian culture. The names being used for two lesbian characters angered the country's religious groups. They were perplexed as to why Hindu names with religious significance were used in the film to depict the anti-Hindu sexual orientation of lesbianism. The concept of lesbianism offended Indian society, particularly religious fanatics. Political and religious propaganda promoting patriarchal power structures altered the course of this film's life. It was banned, and whenever it was screened, there were riots and protests. In response to all the violence surrounding the film, Mehta commented:

> It is amazing that a film which explores choices, desires, and the psyche of people who are victims of people who are victims of tradition, would cause such uproar… It was not the lesbian relationship that so offended middle aged Indian men, it was the fear that *Fire* might shift the status quo of husbands and women might just question their insignificant role in marital relationships that lean very heavily in favour of husbands.

Mehta's next movie, *Water* (2005), was banned from India even before the film was complete. The story revolved around a child widow who was sent to a widow house in the small town of Varanasi in India. Set during the pre-independence era of the 1940s, widows were believed to be unlucky and cursed, and widow remarriage was frowned upon. Protests broke out all around India, and the director and cast of the movie were forced to leave India and shoot the remainder of the film in Sri Lanka (Jacob, 2006). This was not because women's roles were questioned by social norms, as in the case of the film *Fire*, but because a woman director dared to make a period film exposing the ills of the Hindu religion to a Western audience. It did not sit well with political groups of the country who saw the film as downgrading Indian society and religion, made by a woman of Indian origin and Western

upbringing, who knew nothing of the indigenous ways of the Hindu religion (Nandakumar, 2011).

Even though Deepa Mehta had to face a lot of opposition from the people of the country, her movies helped introduce feminist narratives into Indian media; her work paved the way for future female filmmakers, including Bollywood filmmakers, to portray women as something more than an ideal housewife or a pawn in the male lead's story (Tramboo, 2019). With changing times, many female directors have come forward to change the representation of female characters and showcase them in a more accurate way. These directors include Shonali Bose, who has produced numerous women-centric films like *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Ammu* (2007), Meghna Gulzar, director of *Raazi* (2018) and Gauri Shinde, the director of *English Vinglish* (2012). Some of these movies went on to become huge box office successes and got rave reviews from the critics, but they have remained an exception in Bollywood. Women directors in Bollywood are still scarce, with only a small number are breaking the glass ceiling in what is still a male-dominated industry (Jamkhandikar, 2010).

Female directors are still bound to the genres of drama and romance movies, and there are no action movies directed by female directors. The action genre is still heavily patriarchal and male centric. Even though there have been numerous attempts to make an action movie with a female lead, the power position behind the camera is still with the male directors and producers. Female lead action movies in Bollywood, such as *Akira* (2016), *Dhakaad* (2022), or *Mardaani 2* (2019) have met with dismal reviews and low box office revenues. Very few female lead action movies have done well at the box office, such as *NH10* (2015), which went on to become a huge success and earned 320 million over the budget of 80 million, and *Mardani* (2014) emerged as a commercial success and earned 570 million at the box office (Boolywoodhungama, 2014). But is it enough to have a handful of successful women centric

action movies in an industry that produces 1,500 to 2,000 movies in a year? (MasterClass, 2022). This only intensifies the point that Bollywood still believes the action genre is a space suited for men. In an interview with *The Indian Express*, actress Kangana Ranaut stated that actresses in Bollywood do not get the opportunity to do action because that role is reserved for the hero (Shekhar, 2022).

Another issue that needs to be focused on is the issues of ageism in Bollywood which is only applicable to the female gender. Actresses in Indian cinema typically begin their careers in their teenage years as opposed to male actors who start in their twenties (Dwyer, 2002). The female leads are considered old even if they are just 30 years old, and they are type casted into the roles of mothers and peripheral characters. If slightly older female leads are cast opposite younger male actors, the actresses are criticized by the press, industry, and audiences for having lost their "youthful charm" (Ganti, 2004, p. 114). Looking at some of the most prominent action movies of all time, *Dabbang* (2010) stars Salman Khan, who was 45 years old and was seen romancing a 23-year-old Sonakshi Sinha. *Radhe* (2021) starred Salman Khan at age 56, opposite Disha Pattani, who was 28. This trend has only been gaining more momentum with upcoming movies like *Prithviraj* (2022), where a 24-year-old Manushi Chhillar is playing the love interest of a 54-year-old Akshay Kumar.

This demonstrates male centralism and bias in the minds of those who make films and in the minds of viewers who have been conditioned over time to see characters in movies from this perspective. Patriarchal Indian societies view young women as more sensual and sexual, whereas older women are seen as less attractive. The highly male-dominated audience perceives women in a certain way; the directors have their version of what people might want to see. They build their stories for the people; stereotypes are reinforced, continuing the cycle (Nandakumar, 2011). This suggests the possibility of an inherent "male gaze" within and

outside the industry. According to Mulvey (1975), "… the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him" (p. 6). Ageism can also be seen in the new subgenre of action called Geri- action movies. Geri-action is a term within film studies that describes a subgenre of action cinema in which, primarily though not exclusively, middle-aged men partake in narratives of action and spectacle (Dudrah, 2021). Amitabh Bachchan, in his movie *Bbuddah Hoga Tera Baap* (2011), plays the role of an assassin who wants to eliminate all gangsters from Mumbai within two months at the age of 79. While female actors like Shefali Shah, aged 32, played both the mother of actor Akshay Kumar who was five years older than her, and the wife of Amitabh Bachan, aged 63, in the movie *Waqt: The Race Against Time (2005)*, male actors are still being cast as the main lead in action movies even in their late 60s (Chiu, 2022). Actress Sharmila Tagore (2013) called Bollywood 'no country for older women'. At older ages, women are viewed as too old to play central figures, unlike men, who play lead roles for a longer time (Sontag, 1972).

Women's stereotypical representation in Bollywood

In Bollywood, female characters have always been secondary to the hero. This has been going on for a very long time: male characters are central to the script, but the female lead is always in the background or at the mercy of the male members of the movie. As a decorative prop, the female lead has been a mainstay in all major Indian film industries. If there is a hero, he is in the spotlight; a heroine's main job is to worship, adore, and move out of the way when the heroes appear (Gupta, 2018). The female lead is devoid of any independent identity or existence, and her journey through the movie is explored in relation to the male character.

This can be seen in the film *Agneepath* (2012), which revolves around the main lead Vijay Deenanath Chauhan, played by Hrithik Roshan, and his thirst for revenge on Kancha Cheena, played by Sanjay Dutt, for killing his family. Priyanka Chopra, who plays the female lead opposite Hritik Roshan, has no significance to the plot. Her presence provides a break for the audience from the tedious scenes of violence and drama. Nowhere in the film are we told about her as a person; she is only represented as a love interest, which is her complete identity. Bollywood has been focusing on chronicling the male characters' dreams, revenge, and stories. The female lead is present only as a prop to provide a much-needed break from the gruesome and violent action sequences.

Film scholar and author Shoma Chatterji says,

> Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects with rarely any sense of agency being imparted to them. Each phase of Hindi cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal framework of the Indian society. The ordinary woman has hardly been visible in Hindi cinema (Chatterji, 1998).

Many action movies have more than one female lead, but these movies are still male-driven (Jaura, 2015). For example, the movie *The Hero* (2013) was the highest-grossing movie of the year. It had two female leads, Reshma and Shaheen, but their job was to advance Arun's story. Reshma, who is a government spy, was trained by Arun, and before this, she was a simple village girl. Therefore, the male lead is the reason that she has a career and economic and social position. Shaheen, a doctor by profession, is used as a means to an end; Arun initiates a relationship with her to get information about a terrorist group run by her father. Her character changes from a hardworking doctor to a stereotypical lovesick woman who daydreams about Arun and discusses her love life at work.

A scene that clearly shows that women are inferior to men is when Reshma is suspected of being a spy on enemy territory. Reshma is threatened not only with physical violence but also with sexual violence; as a result, her vulnerability is increased because she is a woman. The man who frisks her to check for a wire does so in a sexual and prolonged manner, with a demeaning look in his eyes. This scene exemplifies how, even when a female character defies stereotypes and has an 'unconventional' profession for a woman (in a field dominated by men), she is still inferior to a man. (Jaura, 2015).

Sunita and Kalpana are the female leads in *Ghajini* (2008). Sunita is a medical student who wants to investigate the male lead, Sanjay's, memory loss problem. However, she sabotages Sanjay's plan for vengeance against his fiancée's murderer in the process. As a result, she is portrayed as naive, and her curiosity becomes a hindrance when Sanjay has to clean up the mess she made. Kalpana's character is portrayed as inferior to Sanjay's because, unlike his, hers is based on her appearance. Sanjay is instantly taken with her as a model. As a result, her profession is obviously based on her appearance, and her appearance is also what draws Sanjay to her (Jaura, 2015). The importance of a woman's appearance, especially a sexualized appearance, is also highlighted through Bollywood's popular song-and-dance sequences.

Women's Representation in Bollywood Songs

A characteristic feature of Bollywood that plays a massive role in the humongous box office revenue of the movies is the song and dance sequences. The soundtracks of the movies are released much before the film itself and form the basis for music-based programming on TV channels and radio stations (Ganti, 2012). Along with providing coherence to the narrative, the songs also help shape the film's overall identity and are essential tools for a

movie's promotion and marketing. Some reports estimate that between 30% and 50% of a movie's total budget is spent on songs (Ganti, 2012, p. 349).

The Cinematograph Act of 1952 made it difficult to depict sexuality on screen, resulting in Bollywood finding subtle ways to illustrate overt displays of affection. One such method was using songs as euphemisms for sexual acts, with lyrics often describing the female body and its sensuality in great detail (Ganti, 2013). The artists who often performed these dances were not the leading actresses but were known for their willingness to be cast in leading roles as courtesans and made a name for themselves by performing in such sequences (Chatterjee, 1995). This trend has continued today, with 'item numbers' or 'item songs' essentially replacing the cabaret song-dance sequences of the 1960s and 1970s (Wazir, 2013).

The term item number was first associated with the actress Malaika Arora for her song, "*Chaiay Chaiya*," in the movie *Dil Se* (1998). In the song, Malaika Arora is seen performing alongside one of the most prominent Bollywood actors of all time, Shah Rukh Khan, who had completed just a few movies at the time of this song, and he went on to become one of the biggest movies stars in the country. In contrast, Malaika Arora has been cast only several times as the female lead in movies. She has been a consistent figure in item songs of numerous high-budget movies, including *Dabangg* (2010), *Kaante (2002), Housefull 2(2012), Welcome (2007), and Dolly Ki Doli (2015).*

In recent times, item numbers have emerged as a marketing tool by filmmakers; almost all the movies since the last decade have item numbers whose sole purpose is to mesmerize the audience, particularly the male population, so that they are enticed to go to the theatres to watch the movie. Item numbers are forced into the narrative to attract people to the idea of scantily dressed women dancing in between crowds of men. Most item numbers do not have any crucial part to play in the plot. This can be seen in the movie *Agneepath* (2012), which

revolves around the main lead Vijay Deenanath Chauhan played by Hrithik Roshan, and his thirst for revenge on Kancha Cheena, played by Sanjay Dutt, for killing his family. The movie contains one of the most famous songs of the year, *Chikni Chameli*, performed by Katrina Kaif, which is depicted in a dance bar and has no significance to the movie's plot. The sole purpose of the song is to showcase the actress in revealing clothes, dancing to absurd and vulgar lyrics in between a group of drunk men, and she is seen trying to entice the male lead.

Not only does the song play no essential role in the plot of the movie, but the actress is also figuratively reduced to chicken thighs and breasts in the lyrics, and men are compared to hungry savage beasts: "These songs promote the women as if they enjoy the harassment, but in reality, no woman can enjoy dancing in such a predatory environment. Subconsciously item songs affect society and can lead to justification of behaviours from catcalling to rape" (Chakraborty, 2018). "Katrina Kaif is an excellent example of someone who attracts many people to a film when she does an item number," says Sunny D, a guitarist for the UK-based Asian band The 107 (Mankoo, 2012). Although Kaif's 2010 comedy *Tees Maar Khan* did not do well at the box office, her song *Sheila Ki Jawani* was a big hit in record stores, radio, and web downloads. The performance gained more awards than the film itself, including a Zee Cine Award for best choreography.

The representation of women in classical as well as modern cinema has given rise to numerous debates regarding their subordination to the male gender and objectification of their bodies. The 'woman' has always been looked at as a symbol of fragility and weakness, which is significantly prevalent across all genres of cinema. Filmmakers have misused cinema for the stereotypical, unethical and patriarchal representation of women, which was the primary reason for the advent of feminist film theory. Johnston (1991), one of the first to criticize women's stereotypical and mythical representation in film, claimed that women were

portrayed merely as "a structure, a code, a convention," where the meaning and significance of women were attached to the notion of man (p. 98). Cinema has been referred to as the bearer of ideologies (Tahir, 2010), and these distorted ideologies, influenced by the distorted representations through cinema, provide the groundwork for constructing social structures. As Johnston (1991) argues, the work of feminist film theories is to deconstruct these ideologies that influence the psychological development of individuals, especially men.

Laura Mulvey's ground-breaking theory about women's representation and classical cinema explained the fascination of the audience with cinema via the concept of 'scopophilia', which asserted that classical cinema made use of 'narcissism' and 'voyeurism' to have the spectators engaged in the theatre (Smelik, 2016). The notion of 'voyeurism' referred to the act of objectifying women assessing them in terms of their 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey, 1989). According to Mulvey, the mainstream cinema had the most effect on the audience, where the characters are constructed in a way to cater to the male gaze.

Item songs such as "tip tip barsa paani" from the movie *Sooryavanshi*, "Kamariya" from the film *Stree* and "Laaila" from *Raees* are the perfect examples of how item songs are produced to cater to the male gaze. The camera zooms in on the female body to entice the audience by portraying women as sex objects: "Objectification of a female body kept intensifying. The lens zoomed in and out of their torsos and bellies, from their lips to their hips" (Shekhar, 2018).
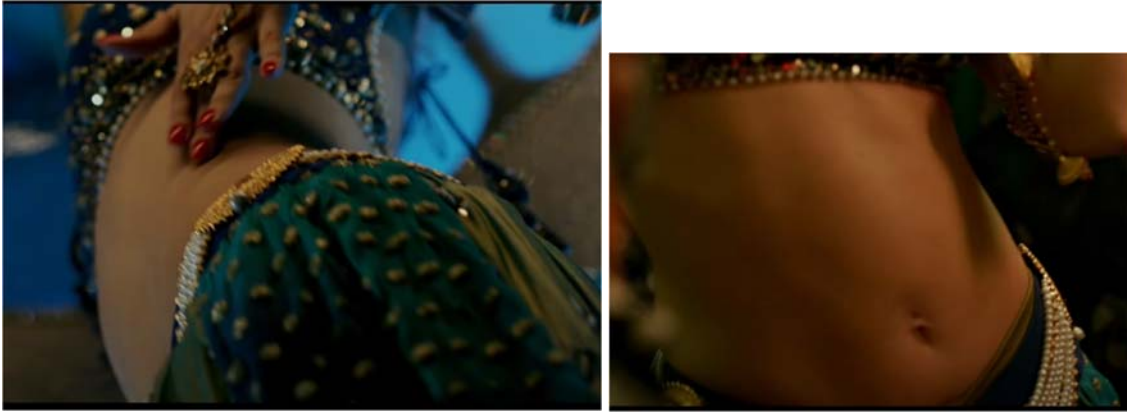
Sunny Leone in the song Laaila from Raaes (2017)

Nora Fatehi in the song Kamariya
from the movie Stree (2018)

According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), women who watch females as sex objects internalize an outsider's view to varying degrees and begin to self-objectify by treating themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated based on appearance. Studies of film also mention that women have been portrayed as sex objects through the wearing of revealing or provocative clothing and exposing an excessive amount of skin (Seidman, 1992; Smith, 2005). Item songs can potentially impact the mindset of men, too, based on research

focussing on reception and effects of sexually explicit hip hop videos. Kistler and Lee (2010) reported that male college undergraduate students who spend most of their time watching highly sexual music videos exhibit greater objectification of female sexuality, sexual broad-mindedness, and stereotyped attitudes toward gender than males who listen to or watch less sexual hip-hop videos. It is possible that the same may be true in this case.

Methodology

This paper uses a combination of different approaches and methods in order to understand the misrepresentation of female character in Bollywood action movies. I am conducting a close reading of two films using a feminist lens. The all-around analysis of the films includes taking into account the dialogue, imagery, billing and paratextual information all viewed through a feminist lens, drawing on the concept of the male gaze. The paper does a close comprehensive examination of the movies and helps in understanding how women are portrayed in Bollywood action movies.

Action movies, a male-centric genre, have been hugely popular in India. In action movies, men take centre stage from the Director, the main lead, and stunt performers; all the positions of authority are held by men (Gören, 2016). For a genre heavily influenced by patriarchal ideas and views, there is little to no research on the representation of women in action movies. Much work has been done on the misrepresentation of women in Bollywood cinema and its different genres like romance, horror, and drama: for example, Banaji (2014), Kapoor (2017), Chatterjee (2021), and Singh (2017). Still, there is a considerable gap when it comes to the representation of women in action cinema. The study tries to delve deeper into the issue of the misrepresentation of women characters and how they are enclosed in stereotypical roles in the movies.

This is the driving force behind this study which aims to address the issues of gender inequality, male dominance, sexualization of women, demeaning women characters, and the close link of cinema with the present society. The bias in cinema is built upon the groundwork of patriarchal structures. The misrepresentation of women in cinema has been debated by numerous scholars, who critique the sexualized and objectified image of women in classic and modern cinema.

The research question of this study is: Are female characters in Bollywood action movies represented in a stereotypical manner, focusing on themes of hegemony, patriarchy, male dominance, and objectification of women in cinema?

Method

For this study, I have selected two Bollywood movies from the action genre, which were box office successes. Even though two movies seem like a small sample, I had to limit myself in order to engage in an in-depth analysis of both the films. In order to understand the latest trends in movies, I have selected movies from the last four years. The reason for selection of these movies is that they are the highest grossing action movies in the past four years and have broken numerous box office records. The modern Bollywood action film is a relatively new genre, having emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s and becoming a fully recognized and enormously popular cinematic form in the 1980s. Action films are built around a core set of characteristics: spectacular physical action, a narrative emphasis on fights, chases, and explosions, and a combination of cutting-edge special effects and stunt work (Kendrick, 2015). "The term 'action' has been used," as Neale (2004) explains, "…to pinpoint a number of obvious characteristics common to these genres and films: a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases, and explosions, and in addition to the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in

performance on athletic feats and stunts" (p. 71). A top-grossing film is one that earns high revenues not only in India but also globally; it is generally intended for mass entertainment. These two films were chosen solely on the basis of their gross revenue in the years 2018-2021.

The first movie selected for this study is *Baaghi 2* (2018); upon its release, the movie broke numerous box office records. The movie went on to dethrone the most anticipated movie of the year, *Padmavat*, which had a big star cast, to become the biggest opener of 2018 and the highest-grossing action movie of 2018 (Goyal, 2018). *Baaghi 2* also surpassed the lifetime revenues of its predecessor, *Baaghi* (2016), and became the highest-grossing movie in the franchise surpassing both *Baaghi* (2016) and *Baaghi 3* (2020), with a worldwide collection of 254 crores (Firstpost, 2020).

The second movie is *Sooryavanshi* (2021). Being one of the highly anticipated movies of the year, the movie collected revenue of 100 crores in just five days (Vaid, 2021). The film has not only managed the highest opening week box office collection in 2021 but also surpassed the all-time box office revenues of 2020's highest-grossing movie, *Tanhaji*, in just six days (Hindustan Times, 2021). It also became the highest-grossing movie of 2021 and the second highest-grossing movie of the franchise, overtaking the first two movies of the franchise, *Singham* and *Singham 2* (Tuteja, 2021).

This study will put these movies under the feminist lens and analyse the archetypal female characterization. I will examine the female characters in both the films and how they are represented in the movie, as well as the way they function in the larger narrative, their definition in the world of the film. I will also look at dialogue, imagery, promotional material, storyline, and how the female lead is represented in all these aspects. The main focus is to analyse the movies in-depth and identify how female leads are misrepresented.

Analysis

In this section, I will analyse the selected movies based on the dialogues, movie scenes, promotional materials, and cast lists to identify the elements of sexism, gender biases, and misrepresentation of female leads. The analysis will focus on the portrayal of the female lead and how she has been presented throughout the movie, along with any other significant female characters from the movie. The analysis brings to light the casual sexism used in action movies to portray women and use them as a tool to further advance the male lead's story. This section identifies the elements of sexism and patriarchal ideas which are forced upon the female characters in the movies (Mukhopadhyay, 2021).

Baaghi 2

Baaghi 2 was released in 2018 and was the highest-grossing Bollywood action movie of 2018, including international revenue. According to the website Bollywood Fever, *Baaghi 2* collected 211 crores in India and 46 crores internationally, with a worldwide gross collected of 257 crores over the budget of 60 crores (Bollywood Fever, 2021).

The movie begins with a scene where two goons beat up a woman and kidnap her daughter, and the mother is the female lead of the film, Neha, played by Disha Patani. The movie's very first scene introduces us to the female lead as helpless and fragile. She is seen getting hit by goons and is not able to help her daughter, who gets kidnapped. Immediately after this scene, we are introduced to the male lead Ronnie played by Tiger Shroff, a special ops Army officer in Kashmir. Much effort is expended to portray him as a strong Army man who is brave, fit, and uber-macho. As a bonus, the filmmakers include a scene in which Ronnie beats up terrorists, establishing his patriotism (Ramakrishnan, 2018).

The contrast between the entry of both the leads showcases the male-centric ideology of Indian society that men need to be robust, intense and vigilant. In contrast, the women are damsels in distress who cannot fight their battles independently. In an interview with Firstpost, the lead actor Tiger Shroff talked about his character and how Ronnie is a one-man army, and he had to go through rigorous training to gain muscles and the physique to look like an action hero (Sinha, 2018). The director has tried to stick to the cliches of previous action movies without trying to break barriers and try something new. The movie has a typical helpless woman who needs a man to save her and a hero who can fight men and machines and showcase his manliness to the audience.

As the story progresses, Neha goes around asking for help. She is again represented as a delicate and defenceless woman. The police, which was not taking the case seriously since they could not find any proof of who the kidnappers were, closed the case after a few months. Rather than trying to find her daughter, Neha is seen crying and going to temples to pray for her daughter. In Bollywood, an ideal Indian woman is someone who, no matter how educated or modern, is depicted as religious and tame. Talking about religion and Bollywood, writer Dimitrova says that "it is characteristic of films that no matter how modern the subject matter is, the notion of the feminine is mostly conservative and traditional" (Dimitrova, 2010). So, as a feminine ideal Indian woman, Neha also goes to temples and prays. The writer wants to make it evident to the audience that she is a quintessential Indian woman, and her role is to pray for a man to come save her. After months of not getting any information about her daughter, she calls Ronnie, to whom she has not talked in years, for help.

We are then thrust into the backstory of Ronnie and Neha and how they met in college and fell in love. Neha's female friend Simi becomes a matchmaker for Neha and Ronnie. Simi is represented as an unconventional tomboy and is not a size zero figure. It is evident that she has been chosen to further emphasize the clichéd standards of beauty displayed by

Neha, to ensure that the purposefully "unattractive" one-dimensional character does not steal the other "attractive" one-dimensional lead's thunder.

After their first meeting, just like any typical Bollywood entitled male, Ronnie starts pestering Neha to go out with him; he even talks about how he likes her for her selflessness and "physical" traits in in front of her father. Films frequently depict heroes pursuing heroines not with poetry, as the concept of chivalry preaches, but with songs and sequences that manhandle her, harassing her with antics such as playing with her dupatta, pulling and pinching her cheeks, blocking her path, coming too close for comfort, and sometimes even kissing her without her permission (Savyasachi, 2017).

After a few tries, Neha gives Ronnie her number, and their love starts to bloom. Even though both of them go to the same university, nowhere in the movie are we informed about what Neha does professionally. Ronnie, on the other hand, is depicted as a typical all-around star. There are significant differences between male and female characters in their occupations onscreen. While men are shown in their workplaces, in meetings with colleagues, or even in uniforms and thus 'on duty,' women are largely shown within the domestic sphere—their domestic labour rendered invisible by its conspicuous absence. Women are always shown at home but what they do is never focused on, and their labour is ignored, and the main focus is on what the men are doing on their professional front. (Mehandru, 2018).

The director inserts subtle hints of gender stereotyping in the movie, like Ronnie playing basketball on a court filled with men. No female athlete is shown playing basketball. On the other hand, Neha is a cheerleader and dances with a group of women. During a time when Indian female athletes are winning medals in the Olympics, it's hard to fathom how there are no women on the basketball court.

Neha has no free will; the men in her life control her actions. Her father wants her to marry a wealthy businessman, and she breaks up with Ronnie to fulfil her father's wishes. Later in the movie, she also informs Ronnie that she is not on social media because her husband doesn't like it. Even though she is an educated modern woman, her actions are still dictated by the men in her life.

With this, the flashback ends, and we are taken back to the present, where Ronnie decides to help Neha find her daughter. He then goes to a mechanic to rent a car, and we are introduced to Usman, a mechanic and drug dealer who becomes Ronnie's companion to help him in his journey. On their first meeting, Usman talks to Ronnie about his wife Mariam. We are never introduced to Mariam, and she is never talked about again, except for the first time when Usman says that she is the one who takes care of the kids and cooks. These are the only pieces of information we are given about her character. Her identity is that of a typical Indian housewife whose sole purpose is to take care of the household and the kids.

Ronnie, along with Neha, goes to the police, and the inspector keeps making sexual overtures towards Neha and passing lewd remarks. Again, this is an incident for Ronnie to showcase his macho side, and he fights with ten police constables to defend Neha's honour. The police officer also asks Neha what kind of a friend Ronnie is, and her character is brought into question because she is a woman. This sheds light on the current feudal mindset of a majority of India, where men and women are judged by a different yardstick (Tamakuwala, 2017).

Ronnie then goes to meet Neha's husband, and we are introduced to Shekhar, who informs Ronnie that Neha had a miscarriage and was diagnosed with PTSD, and they never had a daughter. Neha is again portrayed as naïve, gullible, and helpless. Ronnie confronts Neha about this, but she is adamant that her husband is lying; since no one believes her, she

commits suicide just when Ronnie finds proof of Neha's daughter's existence. Neha dies at the halfway mark of the movie, and the other half is dedicated to Ronnie trying to save Neha's daughter and take revenge for her suicide. The role of Neha was just a means to advance the story of Ronnie. He comes off as her saviour and protector, whereas Neha is portrayed as a weak, naïve damsel in distress, and her death is just a tool to fire Ronnie's anger so he can go on to fight everyone who was involved.

The female lead is represented as nothing more than props in the male hero's journey (Chopra, 2017; Iyer, 2017; Masand, 2016). In an interview with *Mumbai Mirror*, Tiger Shroff stated that his female co-stars are like "padding" that he does not care about, and his character and the script is of the utmost importance (Sahu, 2017). These kind of blatant sexist comments from male stars are representative of how the female lead is of no significance to the movie. The female lead is the mandatory eye candy, rarely going beyond an accessory to the hero's noble pursuits (Ciecko, 2001).

Looking at the female characters in the movie, other than Neha, there are no female characters in the movie. We are introduced to her friend Simi, but she is never to be seen again and has no part to play in the film. Looking at the IMDB cast list of the movie, out of 23 cast members, there are just three female lead actors; one is Disha Patani, who plays Neha, and the other is Shriyam Bhagnani, who plays the role of Neha's college friend Simi and the third is Jacqueline Fernandez, who has an item song in the movie. Other than that, the whole cast comprises of men. All the extras are men; there is not a single woman in any of the action and fighting scenes. In a lot of Bollywood action movies female characters are generally depicted as being dependent on their male counterparts and their character is heavily dependent on the male character for their safety and wellbeing.

Given the history of Indian cinema, this sexist portrayal of women is regrettable. Even when these women are assertive and capable of avenging their loved ones, when necessary, they are primarily viewed as symbols of family, patriarchy, and nation. Female character development is rarely emphasized, and the heroines are frequently just pretty faces who may be instrumental in moving the plot forward as the male character's inspiration/weakness but do not contribute much to the film's action or resolution (Gupta, 2015). Talking about how Bollywood misrepresents women's character, Anvita Madan-Bahel writes in *Sexual Health and Bollywood Films: A Culturally Based Program for South Asian Teenage Girls*, "Unfortunately, the ideal woman, as portrayed by Bollywood, is traditional, submissive and conservative. Women who are 'modern' or 'liberal thinking' are portrayed in a negative light" (Bahel, 2008, p 39).

Sooryavanshi

Sooryavanshi is the highest-grossing movie of 2021. It collected 230 crores in India and 60 crores internationally with a worldwide box office collection of 230 crores, which is the third highest-grossing movie of the main lead, Akshay Kumar (Jangir, 2021).

Sooryavanshi follows DCP Veer Sooryavanshi, the Chief of India's Anti-Terrorism Squad, as he attempts to protect Mumbai from one of history's worst terror attacks. The movie was one of the most highly anticipated movies of the year since it was the third installment of the cop universe movie directed by Rohit Shetty. *Singham* and *Simma* were both a box office hit and the two predecessor movies of the series. Movie critic Kukreja stated that *Sooryavanshi* is nothing short of a celebration of mainstream Hindi cinema, bringing back whistles and cheers to a theatre after a long time. Even though the movie was a box office success, it was not liked by the critics, and one of the main reasons for that was the very limited role of the female lead, Katrina Kaif as Ria. *The New York Times* review of the

movie by Girish stated that apart from the sultry song, the female lead, Katrina Kaif, has no meaningful screen time (Girish, 2021).

The initial publicity materials demonstrate this disparity. Movie posters are typically among the first paratexts encountered by a potential audience. This helps the audience to form their own opinions about who the protagonist is and what genre conventions they can expect the protagonist to follow (Gray, 2010). Akshay Kumar not only heavily dominates Suryavanshi's official poster, but there is also no mention of the female lead. The poster also contains the other two heroes, Ranvir Singh and Ajay Devgan, who have a cameo in the movie. By publicizing the film using traditional marketing strategies that prioritize the saleability of the male lead over the female characters' narratives, the producers and the media maintain hegemonic discourses that inevitably glorify the male lead while ignoring the marginalized voices that the film claims to represent. By centering Kumar in the pre-release publicity campaign, the film foregrounds the supremacy of the man in a patriarchal society.
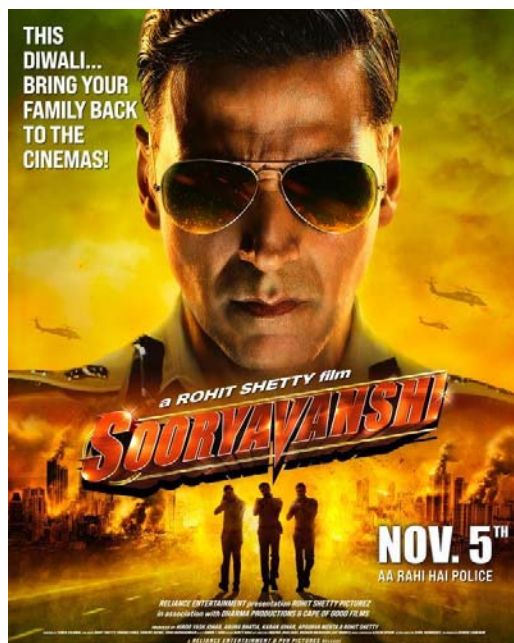
According to Karanjia (1983), the star has defined the economy and determined the very existence of the Hindi film industry throughout its history. Almost every Hindi film has a male lead who dominates every film frame, and the male star has come to dominate the popular Hindi film over the last thirty years. The same issue was also discussed by Hirji (2021) pertaining to the promotion of the movie *Mission Mangal* (2019), which has five main female leads and Akshay Kumar in a special appearance. When it came to the poster, Akshay Kumar was on the centre and the main female leads were given less prominence. Vidya Balan, one of the main leads came to the movie's defence and stated that "When you talk of the business of a film, you talk in terms of the male actor" (cited in Hirji, 2019). However, Balan herself has a track record of starring in blockbuster movies like *Kahaani (2012)* and *The Dirty Picture* (2011), without any help from a big-name male actor.

While piggybacking on an actor's stardom is an age-old pre-release marketing tactic, this male-dominated film industry also gives rise to unequal pay for the actors. According to Menxp, Akshay Kumar was paid 25 crores for the film, whereas Katrina Kaif was paid ten cores for her role in *Sooryavanshi* (*Anand,* 2021). According to the World Economic Forum, no country on the planet pays women the same as men for the same work. It is predicted that closing the global gender pay gap will take up to 170 years (D'Cunha, 2017). According to the latest Monster Salary Index (MSI) in India, the current gender pay gap is 19% (2019). The gap narrowed merely by 1% in 2018 from 20% a year ago (Bhattacharya, 2019). Actress Aditi Rao Hydari said in an interview with PTI that female actors should be paid equal money as male actors since they all put equal efforts into making movies (D'Cunha, 2017).

Focusing on the movie, it revolves around Sooryavanshi and his team of officers who try to prevent a terrorist attack on Mumbai by a group of Pakistani terrorists. His team contains four senior inspectors, all of which are men. The one female officer present is given little to no screentime and importance. According to the data provided by the Bureau of

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Police Research and Development, women police personnel constitute 10.3% of the police force all across India (Bhatnagar, 2022). In a country where women such as Police officer Sanjukta Parashar, known as the Iron Lady of Assam, took down 16 militants, caught many terrorists alive, and seized tons of arms and ammunition (Singh, 2021), rather than celebrating the advancement of women's position in the community, the movie follows the age-old notion that only men are fit to be part of the police force. The film contains only one female officer, Tara, who is kept away from the movie's action sequences. In one scene where Sooryvanshi and his team locate a terrorist named Bilal who has travelled to Mumbai to plant a bomb, coincidentally, Ria is at the same hotel with her kid, so he orders both Ria and Tara to leave the premise since it might get serious.

The other female character in the movie is Sooryvanshi's love interest Ria played by Katrina Kaif. She is a doctor, and they met and fell in love when Sooryavanshi came to her hospital after he was shot. Their relationship is strained because he once severely endangered their son while on a mission, and now Ria wants to go to Australia with her son to keep him safe. Throughout the movie, everyone blames Ria for breaking up their family. Sooryvanshi's friends try to talk her out of going to Australia and ask her to forgive him. She is made to feel guilty for choosing to be independent and keeping herself first. This showcases society's true colors in blaming women for broken relationships. Movies portray a great woman as the one who makes her relationship work despite her husband's flaws. A woman should make her relationship work single-handedly and fight for it because this is her duty (Gupta, 2021). In the movie review, film critic Vivek Mysore stated that Ria's role has no scope to be unique in a character that unfairly makes her the sole reason for the rift in the relationship (Maysore, 2021).

Film scholar and author Shoma says women in Hindi cinema have primarily been used as props, with little agency given to them. The female lead is stripped of all identity and

agency, and her function is to be seen solely through the male protagonist's eyes. In this depiction, women's roles are limited to providing glamor, relief, respite, and entertainment (Shoma, 2017). Most mainstream Indian films end up repeating the damsel-in-distress stereotype of Indian women, whose fulfilment lies in finding a marital partnership of one-sided parasitic dependence, exploitative bargaining, and salvaging support, ensuring protection and provision for life, and this movie is no different. No matter how progressive and independent the woman is, her ultimate role is to be the damsel in distress and wait for the hero to come to save her life, just like in the climax of the movie. When the terrorist kidnaps Ria and puts a bomb on her, it is up to the hero to save her. The actress's role is to stand helplessly, waiting to be saved by the hero. At the end the hero not only saves Ria but also fights the terrorist and saves the country, and since this is Bollywood, the heroine forgets everything he did in the past and accepts his love.

Finally, looking at the cast list of the movie on IMDB, other than Katrina Kaif, who plays the main lead, Ria, and Niharica Raizada, who plays the female officer Tara, there are no significant female characters in the movie. One other female character present in the film is Shruti Ulfat who plays the role of the wife of Omar, the head of the terrorist organization in Pakistan. She has no significant dialogue or role in the film other than praying for the safety of her husband and son. Even in the IMDB list, her character is stated as "Omar's Wife" because that was her whole identity: being a wife. In action movies, an actress is a glamorous object in the film, which serves as a distraction from the lead actor's senseless violence and melodrama throughout the film (Habib, 2017).

Item Songs

As described above, item songs have evolved into an essential component of Bollywood films. An item song is a big-budget song and dance number that often stars a popular actress and is released to generate buzz around the release of a film. Songs in

Bollywood films advance the narrative and storyline; however, item songs are unrelated to the film's theme; their sole purpose is to increase marketability (Mathew, 2020). This can be seen in the case of the movie *Sooryavanshi*, which has an item song, "Tip Tip Barsa Paani," with the female lead Katrina, which became the most viewed video on YouTube within 24hrs of its release with 20 million views (Nayyar, 2021).

In some cases, the item girl invariably appears in the film. Yet, she does not contribute to the plot of the film, nor does she ever meet the hero outside the realm of an item song, which was the case with the item song "EK do Teen" from *Baaghi 2*, which starred Jacqueline Fernandez, who was only present in the movie for one item song (Bhattacharya, 2018).

Focusing on the two-item songs from *Sooryavanshi* and *Baaghi 2*, one thing they both had in common was the representation of the female body as a commodity. The choreography involves purposeful thrusts of the breasts and pelvis in a manner that is evocative of sexual acts. This effect is exaggerated by camerawork that, instead of displaying the woman as a whole, tends to involve a series of rapid cuts focusing on her chest, midriff, legs, eyes, and mouth.

Katrina Kaif in the song Tip Tip from the movie Sooryavanshi (2021)

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The item number is also intended to alleviate any discomfort that a male cinemagoer

may feel while watching a sexualized performance in such a public place as a cinema hall.

For example, in the film, every staged performance is accompanied by its own on-screen

audience. A crowd of men, inebriated and openly leering at the girl while attempting to touch

her, could be seen onscreen. As a result, the viewer in the cinema hall is not guilty of

voyeurism because he is only watching the watcher. In the song "Ek do teen," Jacqueline is

dancing in a bar filled with men and in one scene they take off her jacket and the camera

zooms in on her cleavage. All the while the actress is happily dancing. It is no secret that item

songs promote the objectification of women. This objectification morphs women into sexual

objects that gratify sexual needs. Thereby it takes away any kind of voice or agency to act or

resist.

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In conclusion, media plays a significant role in constructing ideologies and socio-cultural contexts that objectify women. The hold of these songs over the masses can be gauged from the evident popularity of these songs. Males or females, especially the young, readily identify with these media images, making them into trends. It posits a threat to society by normalizing disrespectful and sexist behaviour towards women, as offensive language and inappropriate touch and gaze of the males is shown with a lot of ease and acceptance. It becomes a source of concern as it spreads gender roles throughout society. A check on the content is required concerning the underlying force of forming identity without even realizing it, adhering to the formations and mechanisms of ego and libido at work (Purohit, 2019). Closely monitoring item songs indicates severe concerns for Indian society because item songs further enforce notions regarding gender roles and sexuality, and perpetuate stereotypes, misogynistic attitudes, and hegemonic idealizations of the female body while normalizing sexual violence and objectification of women. In a society trying to come to

terms with the adoption of modernity while attempting to preserve shreds of traditionalism, such media representations add a layer of complexity that may have severe consequences for the Indian society.

Findings and Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, this thesis discovered evidence in various forms to suggest that women in Indian cinema, particularly action films, play stereotyped roles. Even though it is difficult to conclude anything definitively from the analysis of just two films, the study does provide the reader a window into the issue with the action genre. Considered alongside the literature on female representation in Bollywood, there are reasons to believe that there is a significant issue with female representation in Bollywood that bears further examination.

While studies can debate and find support for statements and hypotheses, ultimately, change must come from everyone involved in the film industry. Whether the industry wants this change is not a territory that this paper is qualified to comment on. But the fact that more cinemas should focus on women in a variety of exciting and more challenging roles, apart from women being pure eye candy, is a statement that cannot be disputed. There has to be more for women than just acting as the hero's love interest with a few song and dance sequences.

It would be unfair to say that women characters have not evolved since the inception of Bollywood. A lot of movies have been made with strong female leads across different genres, which went on to become huge box office successes, like *Kahaani* (2012) (Mystery), *Mary Kom* (2014) (Sports/Drama), and *Pink* (2016) (Drama). Even though the industry has been trying to represent women in more strong and powerful roles, we cannot overlook that when it comes to the action genre, women-centric movies are still non-existent. The action genre is still heavily controlled by men, be it actors, directors, or stunt directors. Even though

there have been efforts to change the representation of female characters, we can also not ignore the findings of this study, which suggest that when it comes to the action genres, female leads are still bound to the age-old convention of the patriarchal society. They are still type casted into the roles of the damsel in distress, and her character has no real significance in the film. In an interview, actress Anushka Sharma stated, "Girls are just expected to be good looking, look nice, and just be interesting enough for a guy to fall interested in you in a film…In India, it's reflective of your society. That's the way we want to look at women" (Deonath**,** 2015).

Research on the action genre of Bollywood is a new area, and a lot more work needs to be done to understand the depth of misrepresentation of female characters. This paper tries to open doors for future research on the action genre to understand the ideology behind the patriarchal dominance over the genre. Society still believes that an action is a place for men and women to be seen as fragile and delicate, needing protection. We as a society need to understand the power of women and how far they have come in a country where women like Sakshi Malik, a wrestler who won the bronze medal in 2016, became the first Indian female wrestler to win a medal at the Olympics.

It is time to put to rest the sexist representation of women as a damsel in distress and in need of a savior. Women are more than capable of saving themselves on their own, just like the men, and Bollywood needs to understand this and produce a more realistic image of women in action cinema.

Some might argue that there are exceptions which undermine the suggestion here that action films misrepresent women. To all of them I would like to say that most undoubtedly, while certain changes have come about, these changes remain exceptions and they are not the norm. For exceptions to become more than just exceptions, papers like this must consistently

reiterate the existing norm and pattern; only such reiteration can result in a refreshing change in the monotonous pattern that prevails. If directors and screenwriters thought about films from the perspective of women more frequently than they do now, it might break the vicious cycle of stereotyping and monotony that Indian commercial cinema is trapped in. This may condition audiences to expect different story lines over time, encouraging directors to create newer stories and improving the overall quality of storytelling. Cinema is a highly impressionistic medium, and it is critical that it be used to help people think differently and empathize with different perspectives on reality.

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