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## Representation of Masculinity and Femininity in Indian Popular Culture: A Socio-cultural Study through the Lens of Media, Films and Advertisements

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17314461>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Research Paper

**Accepted:** 17-09-2025

**Published:** 10-10-2025

#### Keywords:

*Popular culture, Society, gender roles, Tradition, Modernity, Gender equality, Media*

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### ABSTRACT

This research article conducts an in-depth analysis of the representation of masculinity and femininity in popular culture within the context of Indian society. Generally Popular culture is a set of beliefs, norms, practices and overall lifestyle followed by masses that often reinforces or challenges traditional representation of masculinity and femininity. Media including social media platforms, films, advertisements play a significant role in shaping our perceptions about the world around us. Generally, we are accustomed to see Indian women as caring, obedient, docile and dependent on their male partners because of traditional presumption of gender norms but in this age of globalization the whole scenario of patriarchal dominance is changing slowly but steadily. In social media platforms, films and television advertisements women are being portrayed as self-reliant, independent and rebellious against patriarchal oppression. It also explores how media reinforces and sometimes challenges traditional stereotypes of gender roles that restraint individual prospects. The article also highlights major clashes between tradition and modern trends in representation of gender norms. This study shows that promoting more nuanced and inclusive representations of masculinity and femininity will break traditional gender stereotypes, encourage gender equality, and lead to certain societal changes. By examining the effect of representation on societal viewpoints, this paper provides



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deeper understanding of the contribution of popular culture in shaping gender norms and reshaping societal values in Indian society. Hence, this article focuses on the importance of rethinking traditional norms of gender roles in popular culture of Indian society in order to advance gender equality and overall betterment of our society.

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### **Introduction:**

Popular culture of a society shaped by numerous socio-cultural factors like, shared beliefs, moral values, societal norms, modern trends, and so on. Indian society basically runs by traditional norms, beliefs and moral principles with specific roles for both male and female. Males are supposed to be strong and authoritative where females are supposed to be subservient to their male counterparts. The presentation of masculinity and femininity in Indian media is a multidimensional issue that reverberates cultural norms and societal expectations of the country. But, in this age of globalization Indian society has been getting a massive exposure of western culture and modern trends through social media and films. The advent of 21<sup>st</sup> century highlights a giant leap towards the transfiguration of traditional values and societal norms regarding gender roles. This research article aims to investigate the transformation of masculinity and femininity in Indian media, analysing the representation of gender roles in media, films and advertising, and exploring the effect of these propaganda on social attitude.

### Masculinity in Traditional Frame

The core idea in “Precarious Manhood” (2013) by Joseph Vandello and Jennifer Bosson is “Manhood is a social status that is hard to earn and easy to lose; men constantly need to demonstrate their masculinity.”

The depiction of masculinity in Indian films, media and advertising has been a centre of attraction for a long period of time. Traditional assumptions of masculinity have been extremely entrenched in Indian culture, and these notions have played a remarkable role in moulding societal outlook towards masculinity and men. In order to understand the societal viewpoint regarding masculinity we need to study the representation of male role in every branch of Indian media minutely. In traditional culture of India, men are generally related to courage, strength and authority.



R. W. Connell's celebrated work "Masculinities" (1995) propounded that "There's a culturally exalted form of manhood---hegemonic masculinity---that legitimates men's dominance over women and other men."

Men are reckoned to be the protectors, breadwinners of family and near ones. These traditional characteristic traits of masculinity often portrayed in Indian films and advertising. Traditional masculinity has been ingrained into the social attitude through the perpetuation of male characteristic features depicted in Indian media. Bollywood films from 1980's, like, Zanjeer (1973), Sholay (1975), Deewaar (1975) and Kranti (1981) showcase strong-willed, rebellious and anti-institutional character fighting against social injustice and corruption. In 1990's Bollywood films like Hero (1983), Mard (1985), Meri Jung (1985), Arjun (1985), Karma (1986), Naam (1986), Mr. India (1987), Tezaab (1988), presented male lead character as the protector of his family, lady love and dear ones.

Raewyn Connell proposed the theory of hegemonic masculinity in her critically acclaimed work "Masculinities" (1995). This work investigates the ways through which masculinity is formed and maintained in society. Hegemonic masculinity defines the dominant form of masculinity that is further idealized and normalized in the socio-cultural context.

"Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77).

Television advertisement has a great impact on this issue of stereotyping masculine image in Indian society. Commercial ads for products like perfumes, shaving cream, motor bike often represent men as strong, confident and successful. This type of characterization has consolidated the image of an ideal man amongst the audience leading towards the perpetuation of male role in our society. According to Edward H. Thompson Jr. and Joseph Pleck "Shared cultural beliefs prescribe how men should think, feel, and act--these masculinity ideologies undergird men's behaviour"

### Femininity in Traditional Frame

Judith Butler in her phenomenal work "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (1990) conveys the core idea of formation of feminine gender roles. Butler propounds that gender is not an inherent trait, rather a performance. The construction of gender depends on the repetition of specific acts and behaviours.



“There is no identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25)

Media has been playing a pivotal role in shaping traditional femininity since ages. Indian films and advertisements are prominent in reinforcing traditional framework for feminine ideals. This representation of femininity gradually created a stereotypical image of women and femininity deeply embedded into the core of our belief system. Indian media eternalizes traditional feminine traits by displaying women in ideal role perpetuating the societal notion that women’s duties lie within the domestic boundary. Indian films and television advertisements have a major impact on societal beliefs and attitudes regarding femininity.

The idea of the male gaze is introduced by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her prominent essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). The basic concept of the male gaze is the way of objectification of women as a means of sexual desire for the male viewer, eternalizing patriarchal dominance and societal power dynamics. The directors or creators of films and advertisements exploit female body image in order to attract male audience. They often display female body parts before showing the face of the female characters. “The male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 6-18). The objectification of women is still prevalent in the Indian films and T.V ads, ignoring the female agency and nuanced representation of femininity.

The image of traditional Indian women was reflected in films, like “Mother India” (1957), “Sujata” (1959), “Anupama” (1966), “Satyakam” (1969), “Ankhon Ankhon Mein” (1972), “Daag” (1973), “Hum Aapke Hai Kaun..!” (1994), “Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge” (1995), “Kabhi Khusi Kabhie Gham...” (2001). In these films female characters were showcased as caring, nurturing, devoted and prioritizing family above all. They sacrifice their personal desire, pleasure, likes and dislikes for the sake of family’s betterment.

Carol Gilligan, in her significant work on Care Ethics, “In a Different Voice” (1982) argues that care giving nature of women is crucial in order to sustain a healthy relationships and moral decision-making.

“The morality of responsibility, rooted in the experience of connection and the value of care, is seen as a weakness or a deficiency in moral reasoning.” (Gilligan 22)

Indian advertisements have been displaying women as ideal homemaker and caregivers, especially in child care and household affairs. T.V ads for household products like, cooking oil, detergent powder, cosmetics, baby products and kitchen appliances showcase women as the primary user of these items.



These ad films perpetuate the idea that women are expected to care their family's needs and their roles are marginalized within the domestic periphery.

Catherine Mackinnon's seminal work on Dominance Theory, "Towards a Feminist Theory of the State" (1989) is worth discussing in this context. Mackinnon argues that traditional society is organized to sustain male authority over women, highlighting the power dynamics between men and women.

### Restrained Gender Roles and its Repercussions

Societal expectations and norms often restrict gender roles for both men and women. Men are depicted in media as stoic and emotionally strong restraining them to express emotions and weakness. They are forced to hide their inner feelings leading to disrupt mental wellbeing and develop anxiety and depression. The suppressed emotions may hinder to form and nurture a healthy relationship. Men often hesitate to seek help even in their tough times, because of their strong sense of self-reliance and stoicism, eternalizing a cycle of perpetual pain and suffering. They think that asking for help is a sign of weakness and vulnerability. Men are supposed to be aggressive, dominant, and powerful as per traditional framework reinforcing destructive stereotypes. This may trigger the glorification of dominance and aggression, which may potentially produce toxic masculinity. The overemphasis on aggression and dominance can cause unhealthy relationships where sensibility and empathy are the basis of a healthy relationship. Under the pressure of traditional norms, societal expectations, and public attitudes, men may struggle with restrictive gender roles, compromising future prospects and career opportunities. Men are forced to conform masculine norms that can badly affect mental health as they are not expected to express weakness or seek help. As a result, repressed emotions develop anxiety and depression, perpetuating a life of silent suffering.

Psychologist Ronald Levant and Joseph Pleck opined that, "Rigid social norms about being manly create psychological strain---men who exceed, fail, or reject these norms suffer stress."

In Indian films and T.V ads women are most often objectified and portrayed as a sex symbol. This objectification and sexualization of women lead to low self-esteem and lack of confidence that can directly impact their career and overall mental wellbeing. Body shaming is a stigma in our society even in this age of technological advancements. Both men and women have been getting bullied and judged on the basis of their body types. Women with brown or black complexion, men with baldness are being marginalized in our society. The perpetuation of patriarchal norms and traditional beauty standards are the two reasons behind the rapid growth and popularity of beauty cream and hair care product in India.



The traditional concept of beauty is so deeply ingrained into our psyche through the visual representation of films and advertising that we are unable to get out of it easily. The pressure to fit into traditional beauty standards can severely affect women's confidence and self-acceptance, developing into issues like anxiety and depression. Traditional stereotypical representations of femininity compel women to follow traditional careers opportunities, limiting their creativity and future prospect. Because of traditional representation of restrictive gender roles they may face difficulty in establishing their social identity. So, throughout the analysis we can state that both men and women are facing difficulties in conforming traditional gender roles. Although there is a ray of hope, that Indian media hasn't only been reinforcing but also challenging the traditional norms and beliefs regarding the gender roles, reflecting the socio-cultural changes in our society.

#### A Wind of Change: Redefining Gender Roles

Media plays a crucial role in both formation and dissolution of any trends and stereotypes in society with the course of time. In Indian popular culture, Indian films, T.V ads and social media are torch bearer of social changes. The depiction of masculinity in television ads and Indian films have gone under a drastic change which is clearly evident in recent years. Patriarchal norms and societal beliefs are being challenged, traditional stereotypes are getting shattered, and more complex characters are coming to light.

Erick Anderson's conveys the idea of emerging inclusive masculinity in his seminal work "Inclusive Masculinity" (2009) that "In context of declining homophobia and rigid gender policing, new softer and more emotionally open masculinities emerge."

Indian films, especially Bollywood mirrors the societal norms, beliefs and attitudes minutely through a more complex and nuanced characterization. "My Brother... Nikhil" (2005) is the story of a HIV affected young man faces discrimination in society. In "Jab We Met" (2007), Sahid Kapoor played the role of Aditya Kashyap is an amiable character walks against the traditional set of norms and societal expectations. He is sympathetic, emotional and supportive. In "Chak De! India" (2007), Shah Rukh Khan played the role of a hockey coach who trains female national hockey players team, breaking traditional masculine stereotypes. "Aligarh" (2015) inspired from a true story based on the life of a gay professor who fights for his identity in a conservative society. In "KI and Ka" (2016), Arjun Kapoor played the role of Kabir who is humble, liberal and supportive. He wishes to be a house husband, dissolving the line of demarcation between male and female gender roles. "Kapoor & Sons" (2016), showcases a progressive family and a gay character's happy life with his family. "Chhapaak" (2020) portrays love story of Amol,



played by Vikrant Massey, and a victim of acid burns. Amol is caring, empathetic, and supportive, displaying more nuanced side of masculinity. “Subh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan” (2020) is the love story of a gay couple featuring Ayushman Khurana and Jitendra Kumar.

There is also a shift in the field of Indian advertising where men are being portrayed as sensible, caring and supportive. Dove Men+ care from Hindustan Unilever portrays a father who is caring and actively engaged with the life of his child. Gillette by P&G features emotional and vulnerable challenging patriarchal notion of masculine ideals. Tanishq’s Diwali Ad of 2020 shows a single father who is dedicated to his daughter, exploring a more nuanced side of traditional masculinity. Therefore, Indian films and advertising have been playing a crucial role to shape patriarchal norms and societal attitudes.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has also been witnessing ground breaking representation of femininity in Indian films and advertising. Indian films and T.V ads have been reverberating collective perspectives on screen. “The Dirty Picture” (2011), featuring Vidya Balan, portrays the controversial life of Silk Smitha. This film is also a social critique, commenting on social hypocrisy. “Queen” (2013), Kangana Ranaut played the female lead character named Rani Mehra, who is an independent and strongly resolute woman, embarking on a journey of self- discovery. “Mary Kom” (2014) has been an inspiration for millions of women in India as well as across the globe. The titular character was played by Priyanka Chopra, shows that determination and perseverance can win over any obstacles in life. “Mardaani” (2014), featuring Rani Mukherjee in lead role, Shivani is an honest and determined police officer raises her voice against crime and injustice towards women and fights to deliver justice to victims. “Pink” (2016), is the story of three women who challenges societal power dynamics when they filed a case against a corrupted politician’s spoilt brat as he tried to kiss one of them. “Lipstick Under My Burkha” (2016), the film characterizes four female leads and their constant challenges against patriarchal norms and traditional framework of gender roles. “Tumhari Sulu” (2017), Vidya Balan plays the titular character Sulu, is the story of a housewife’s journey of becoming self-reliant and independent. “Veere Di Wedding” (2018), revolves around the life of four unapologetic and independent women, questioning traditional gender roles and patriarchal dominance. “Thappad” (2020), is the story of a woman who raises her voice against societal attitudes and expectations regarding marriage and domestic violence after her husband slaps her. “Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl” (2020), portrays the biography of Gunjan Saxena designated as the first female Air Force officer. The film recounts the journey of Gunjan Saxena in the path of determination and perseverance to achieve her goal. “Gangubai Kathiawadi” (2022), tells the commendable journey of a prostitute to become a powerful figure in Mumbai.



Nowadays, Indian T.V ads are not left behind in this issue. A few instances would be more than enough to perceive the undercurrent of social transformation. Havells' "Hawa Badlegi" showing a husband wants to adopt his wife's surname after getting married. "Smile Karo Aur Shuru Ho Jao" is a popular tagline innovated by Colgate, the ad displays a newly married couple's decision to adopt the wife's last name. In Reliance Fresh's "Jee Le Zara" ad a proud mother talks about the struggles of her mother who challenged patriarchal norms and societal expectations in order to realize her dream. Ariel's "Share the Load" Campaign promotes gender equality through encouraging men to share household responsibilities. Vim's ad promotes gender equality and fairness through questioning societal expectations that only housewives are supposed to wash utensils. Fab Alley's "What the F\*k Should I Wear" ad is like a thunderous voice against societal expectations and patriarchal norms, empowering women to take stands and make individual choices.

#### Conclusion:

Any organized society is ever changing so is popular culture. Mass media play the role of a catalyst in the transformation of culture and society, often reinforcing or challenging traditional values and patriarchal dominance in issues related to gender stereotypes in Indian society. After the analysis of Indian mass media throughout this research paper we can undoubtedly conclude that Indian films and advertising have a lasting impact on popular culture, shaping societal norms and beliefs, and traditional patriarchal values regarding gender roles. Indian Films and advertisements or ad films as an art form reflect our society and its collective attitudes in various aspects. Societal beliefs and expectations, and public attitudes and collective opinions have been changing along with the evolution of society. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century can be distinguished as the "Age of Globalization". Indian popular culture has witnessed a drastic change in the matter of representation of masculinity and femininity through films and advertising. Nowadays, the new age women challenge traditional expectations and patriarchal power dynamics, utilizing education as a weapon to win over social barriers. Besides women Indian media has also been showcasing more nuanced and complex sight of masculinity. Men are not just dominant and aggressive but also sensible and supportive towards their family and female counterparts, breaking traditional stereotypes and questioning social standards. These complex and diverse representations promote inclusivity and gender equality resulted in opening up new horizon of prospects and opportunities for both men and women. Thus, we can conclude that ground-breaking representations of masculinity and femininity are crucial for sustaining gender equality, nurturing healthy relationships, emphasizing individual prospects, promoting mental wellbeing, and establishing a more equitable and fair society for the sake of holistic development and progress of humanity.



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