



The Goddess Paradox: Deification, Gender, and Power in Media Representation

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ABSTRACT

The symbolic deification of women portraying them as embodiments of moral virtue, purity, and endurance has remained a persistent motif across cultures and historical moments. In modern media, particularly within Indian contexts, such representations often mask patriarchal structures under the guise of empowerment. This paper interrogates the dual role of deification: as both reverence and regulation, mostly in Indian context. Drawing from feminist media theory and cultural analysis, it explores how films, advertisements, and social media platforms reproduce the goddess archetype to sanctify ideal womanhood while reinforcing hierarchies of gender, caste, and class. In the contemporary world the mother archetype has evolved into modern 'Superwoman' who balances everything. Using a qualitative semiotic approach, this study analyzes selected cultural texts to demonstrate how symbolic sanctification of women converts cultural reverence into social constraint. The findings reveal that media deification, though superficially empowering, frequently confines women within moralized ideals of purity and service. By studying these motifs the study aims to trace how the 'empowered woman' is visually and narratively constructed within patriarchal frameworks. This paper asks how does the symbolic deification of women in Indian media reinforces intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and gender beneath the rhetoric of empowerment? The paper concludes by arguing for a shift toward more humanized, complex portrayals of women



representations that emphasize autonomy over divinity, and authenticity over idealization.

Introduction

Across societies and historical epochs, the image of the divine woman has persisted as one of the most powerful and paradoxical cultural symbols. From goddesses in mythology to the 'superwoman' of contemporary advertising, the portrayal of women as sacred or morally superior beings has carried both reverence and repression. In the Indian context, women are often referred to as Devi: the goddess, the mother, the nurturer, while in Western popular culture, women are represented as saints, angels, or moral anchors. These constructions project idealized femininity that, while seemingly empowering, often bind women within restrictive moral and behavioral codes. The evolution of this trope in media has had deep cultural consequences. In India, television serials such as *Anupamaa* and films like *Kabir Singh*, continue to showcase women negotiating societal expectations of virtue and endurance. Advertising campaigns like Surf Excel's 'Daag Achhe Hain' and Tanishq's interfaith wedding campaign rely heavily on the figure of the morally superior woman to deliver their messages of sacrifice and tolerance. The question that drives this paper is deceptively simple: Is the deification of women in media a blessing or a curse? On one hand, it appears to honor femininity and recognize women's power; on the other, it defines that power within patriarchal, casteist, and moral frameworks. The question therefore, is not whether women are visible in media, but how this visibility continues to serve patriarchal logics under the guise of progress.

Through the lens of Indian society, the deification of women is deeply intertwined with religious and cultural archetypes. Society often draws parallels between the ideal woman and goddesses expecting her to embody patience, virtue, and strength in impossible balance. The "Lakshmi-like" woman must be gentle and self-sacrificing, and the "Durga-like" figure capable of managing every role with divine efficiency. These metaphors, though celebrated as empowering, but most of the times impose a quiet burden demanding perfection and endurance rather than agency and individuality, where divinity is both pedestal and prison.

Although the symbols differ, similar patterns of expectation and restraint shape women's experiences across cultures and faiths. While these representations are celebrated as cultural ideals, they frequently impose unrealistic standards, creating psychological and social pressure rather than genuine



empowerment. This tension between admiration and expectation highlights the enduring challenge of translating symbolic reverence into lived autonomy, illustrating that the glorification of women in media can simultaneously inspire and constrain. Research indicates that persistent exposure to idealized images can create internalized pressure, influencing self-esteem, career choices, and relationship norms.

While dealing with this trope of glorifying multitasking, digital platforms have increasingly adopted a neoliberal lens, using feminism as a tool for visibility and clout. This trend risks undermining its genuine urgency and authenticity, turning empowerment into a mere performative display.

Consequently, media narratives risk creating a superficial notion of freedom, where the appearance of empowerment eclipses the realities of oppression. These representations are particularly significant because media shapes perceptions from a young age, influencing values, behavior, and aspirations. In a country like India, where entertainment remains a primary source of cultural learning, the images and narratives presented on screen have a profound impact on upbringing and socialization. Children and adolescents absorb ideas of morality, femininity, and success through these portrayals, internalizing the expectations of multitasking, sacrifice, and perfection. As such, the glorification of women whether as caregivers, goddesses, or successful professionals does not merely reflect society; it actively participates in producing the social norms that govern behavior and self-perception.

The study situates the discussion within the scholarship on postfeminist sensibilities, intersectionality, and gendered media representation, drawing on the works of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Michel Foucault (1979), Laura Mulvey (1975), Rosalind Gill (2007), Uma Chakravarti (1993), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), and Nivedita Menon (2012).

Theoretical Framework

This research draws upon a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation that interlinks feminist theory, poststructuralism, and intersectionality to examine how the deification of women operates both as glorification and constraint. Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the 'male gaze' argues that media constructs women as objects of visual pleasure for a masculine spectator. In non-Western contexts, women are not only sexualized but sanctified, the gaze becomes moral rather than erotic. This 'deified gaze' celebrates women for virtue and restraint but still controls them. Foucault's (1979) theory of disciplinary power explains how reverence operates as control, women internalize ideals of moral superiority and self-sacrifice. Rosalind Gill (2007) examines postfeminist media where empowerment is repackaged through consumerism. Advertising equates empowerment with moral virtue. Chakravarti



(2003) and Rege (1998) show that caste patriarchy regulates women's purity to preserve hierarchy. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality reveals how deification privileges upper-caste, elite femininity, excluding marginalized women.

Literature Review

Research consistently reveals that idealization and objectification coexist. Simon de Beauvoir's (1949) assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" captures the constructed nature of femininity. Her insight read, along side Michel Foucault's (1979) notion of disciplinary power, underscores the social institutions cultivate conformity through internalized regulation rather than overt coercion. In media this manifests as self policing femininity, the woman who "chooses" to balance professional ambition and domestic harmony. What appears as agency often disguises as adaptation, and what appears as reverence may perpetuate control. Mulvey (1975) shows women are visual objects, the theory of male gaze reveals how cinematic language often constructs women as spectacles to be looked at rather than subjects who look back. Even in seemingly progressive portrayals, visual pleasure frequently relies on objectification, disguising surveillance and desire as empowerment; Rosalind Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009) reveal postfeminist media recycles gender norms, they critique the rise of postfeminist media culture, where autonomy and choice are celebrated while structural inequalities are obscured. Nivedita Menon (2012) argues reverence conceals control, it converts subordination into virtue. Uma Chakravarti (2003) ties control to caste purity, she writes to challenge patriarchy effectively, feminism must also dismantle caste privilege otherwise it replicates the same exclusionary hierarchies it seeks to oppose. She also highlights 'Savarna feminism' referring it to be feminist narratives that primarily reflect the experiences and struggles of upper-caste, urban women, often sidelining marginalized voices. Banet-Weiser (2018) notes that empowerment is commercialized through popular feminism. Indian advertising campaigns like Tanishq's weddings and Surf Excel's 'Daag Achhe Hain' use moral purity as brand strategy. Sharmila Rege (1998) reminds how caste and class too shape these portrayals of ideal women. This study builds on these frameworks to examine whether such portrayals genuinely challenge or merely repackage existing hierarchies under the guise of reverence. As Banet-Weiser(2018) notes, "popular feminism" often thrives in tension with "popular misogyny", where empowerment is packaged for consumption. This dynamic underscores the need to read media texts not merely as reflections of gender norms but as active producers of ideology.

While Western feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Laura Mulvey, and Rosalind Gill interrogate the structures of desire, representation, and postfeminist sensibility, Indian scholars such as Uma



Chakravarti and Nivedita Menon ground these debates in the lived realities of caste and cultural politics. Together, they reveal that empowerment cannot be understood through a universal lens but must be examined within the social hierarchies that shape access, privilege, and voice. This synthesis underscores the need for a contextual feminism, one that recognizes how liberation in Indian media often coexists with subtle reinforcement of patriarchal and casteist norms. The dialogue between global feminist theory and Indian socio-cultural analysis thus allows for a more nuanced understanding of how media reproduces hierarchy under the guise of progress.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine how Indian media: films, television, and digital platforms constructs and circulates the idea of women's empowerment through narratives that often intertwine reverence and control. Specifically, the research seeks to:

Analyze how the deification of women in media reinforces or subverts patriarchal structures.

Explore how intersectional factors such as caste, class, and cultural privilege shape the portrayal of "empowered" women.

Identify recurring visual and narrative strategies that commodify empowerment through popular culture.

Critically evaluate the implications of such portrayals on public understanding of feminism, agency, and gender equality.

This research contributes to broader debates on gender representation, agency and intersectional inequality in visual culture.

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative semiotic and discourse analysis approach. Media texts are analyzed as cultural codes that reproduce power. The purpose is not to measure representation quantitatively but to decode the symbolic patterns and ideological undercurrents embedded within these portrayals.

Sample Selection: Films (Mother India, Kabir Singh, Santosh); Advertisements (Tanishq, Surf Excel, Ariel) other popular Advertisements like Fair and lovely(now glow and lovely), Dove's Real beauty further reveal the contradictory imagery associated with empowerment known as commodified feminism; Television narratives like Anupama(starplus) and Search(Disney+Hotstar) exemplify contemporary



portrayals of women balancing family duties with professional identity, while *Made in heaven* (Amazon prime) and *Delhi crime* (Netflix) represent urban, class privileged femininity negotiating systematic constraints; Social media influencers promoting traditional yet empowered femininity, on social media platforms feminism is often reduced to trend used by influencers for visibility rather than genuine advocacy, some influencers dismiss feminism for clout or attention reinforcing the very stereotypes the movement seeks to challenge. While contemporary media increasingly centers women's stories, many narratives such as film (*Veere di wedding*) or Tv Series (*Four more shots please!*, Amazon Prime) conflate liberation with consumerism. These narratives often repackage feminism accessible to the privileged while trivializing the collective struggle of women across caste and class lines by framing empowerment within the boundaries of wealth, glamour and individual assertion rather than systematic change.

Item dances in Indian cinema, examples *Munni Badnam hui* (Dabangg, 2010) or *Nasha* (Raid 2, 2025) often featuring women performing highly sexualized and stylized numbers, serve as a recurring motif that reflects the commodification and objectification of the female body, aligning with Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze.

Cult films such as *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) continue to be celebrated across generations, entertaining audiences while subtly embedding patriarchal norms, habits, and social learning.

Satyajit Ray's *Devi* (1960) remains as the classic, quintessential cinematic exploration of deification literally and symbolically. It powerfully illustrates how divinization becomes a site of both reverence and oppression. The movie portrays how a woman is elevated to goddess status by patriarchal faith which slowly consumes her individuality.

By including digital texts, the research situates traditional media narratives within a broader, cross-platform ecosystem, acknowledging the influence of algorithm-driven visibility and the performative nature of online representation. This cross-platform approach situates traditional narratives alongside evolving digital portrayals, highlighting both continuities and transformations in gender representation. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of how reverence, idealization, and market-driven empowerment intersect across mediums.

Analytical Framework: (1) Mythic symbolism- identifying goddess archetypes; (2) Narrative function- virtue as moral driver; (3) Intersectional visibility- whose femininity is divine. (4) Having it all trope-



added pressure of being multitaskers. (5) the emergence of elite or pop feminism - that celebrate choice and desire but erase structural inequalities. The analytical framework employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Semiotic Analysis, and Thematic Analysis to interpret language, imagery, and symbolism. CDA allows exploration of how power relations and ideology are embedded in dialogue and messaging. Semiotic analysis decodes visual elements such as camera angles, lighting, color schemes, and body language that construct femininity and virtue. Thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns of multitasking, sacrifice, and empowerment across media texts. Each text was read for its visual symbols, narrative arcs, and ideological undertones that sustain patriarchal logic while presenting progress.

This interpretive design positions the researcher as an engaged observer, reading media not as passive reflection but as an active producer of gender ideology where empowerment and obedience often coexist beneath the same narrative surface.

Analysis and Discussion

The Cinematic Goddess: Mother India's Radha embodies the nation; Kabir Singh's Preeti portrayed as soft epitome of femininity who chose the angry young man despite being humiliated, Uma Chakravarti's (2003) idea of gendering caste resonates here : purity, patience and service remain moral currencies; new age movie Santosh where woman navigates the dual expectations of professional commitment and responsibility; a similar trope seen in series streaming on OTT platforms like Hotstar named 'Search', the representation of professional women in Search and Delhi Crime(Netflix) further illustrates the double burden of labour and care. Their "choice" to balance duty and ambitions signals autonomy, yet it is autonomy defined by compliance. Simultaneously, Foucault's (1979) notion of disciplinary power underscores how these representations internalize societal expectations, shaping women's behaviour and self perception.

Following Chakravarti (1993) and Crenshaw (1989), this study emphasizes that media representations are not experienced uniformly across social hierarchies. Most films, serials, and advertisements analyzed privilege upper-caste, urban women, sidelining the realities of women from marginalized castes, lower socio-economic classes, or rural backgrounds. For example, while Four More Shots Please!(Amazon prime series) celebrates professional autonomy and sexual freedom, it largely reflects elite lifestyles, leaving the struggles of less privileged women invisible. These omissions reinforce the notion of "savarna feminism," where the empowerment of upper-caste women is celebrated while systemic inequalities affecting others remain unaddressed. These portrayals celebrate agency, they risk trivializing



the collective struggle for gender equality by reducing empowerment to an individualized, market-driven performance.

Advertising, Sanctifies Everyday Women: Surf Excel and Ariel equate virtue with caregiving, these examples when analysed through the theoretical lenses of Simon de Beauvoir's social construction of femininity, Michel Foucault's disciplinary power and Rosalind Gill's post feminist sensibility, reveal how media industries perpetuate patriarchal norms under the guise of progress; Tanishq markets moral respectability as progressive. Beauty care products like Fair and lovely (now glow and lovely) and Dove's Real beauty claim to celebrate confidence and self worth but often reinforce colorism and heteronormative desirability. By framing beauty as both a personal choice and a marker of moral or social worth, they illustrate how empowerment can be commodified, transforming feminism into a consumer oriented ideology.

The Digital Goddess: Influencers embody neoliberal empowerment- moral, aesthetic, and marketable. Social media and influencer marketing also form a new dimension of analysis. Many digital advertisements employ the language of feminism to market products, these campaigns mirror what Rosalind Gill describes as commodity feminism.

Platforms like Instagram and TikTok often commodify performance and sexuality under the guise of empowerment, echoing the male gaze and postfeminist sensibilities described by Mulvey (1975) and Gill (2007). While these digital performances may appear liberating, they frequently reinforce narrow beauty standards and upper-class, urban ideals, demonstrating that the tension between visibility and subordination persists across media forms.

Movies like Hum Saath Saath Hain (1999) and Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995) normalize the ideal of the self-sacrificing, dutiful woman whose worth is measured by her compliance with family and societal expectations. From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1979), this represents a form of disciplinary power, where media functions as a mechanism that shapes internalized norms and behaviors, subtly regulating femininity without overt coercion. Even decades later, these narratives influence contemporary perceptions of women's roles, creating a cultural continuity that intersects with postfeminist critiques of autonomy and choice.

While earlier cinema glorified women through overt self sacrificing, contemporary portrayals celebrate them as 'multitaskers' who gracefully balance ambition and duty; one of the prime examples of such trope is 'Anupamaa' daily soap celebrated all over the country, despite moments of rebellion, the serial



continuously frames her worth through caregiving and moral superiority. Such portrayals make empowerment a prescribed expectation rather than an organic pursuit of equality.

Having said that, characters in *Made in Heaven* (Amazon Prime, tv series) or Advertisements like Ariel reflect urban privileged, where feminist ideals are marketed as lifestyle aesthetics, far removed from working class or rural realities.

Ray's *Devi* remains a haunting portrayal of how patriarchal veneration strips a woman of personhood, a theme that continues to echo in modern narratives where empowerment is conflated with idealized endurance.

The seeming evolution of representation conceals a persistent undercurrent of moral expectation. The question persists: has the representation of women truly evolved, or has it merely become more subliminal in nature?

Limitations

This study focuses primarily on mainstream Hindi-language films, television serials, OTT productions, and selected advertisements, which may limit the representation of regional or vernacular media. While texts spanning classical cinema to contemporary streaming platforms were analyzed, not every era or genre could be comprehensively included. The qualitative textual analysis relies on interpretive reading of symbolism, narrative, and visual codes, which may be influenced by researcher perspective. Additionally, although intersectional factors such as caste, class, and religion are considered theoretically, the primary media texts predominantly reflect upper-caste, urban experiences, limiting the full representation of marginalized voices. Furthermore, audience reception and individual interpretation were not directly measured, meaning the study cannot fully account for how different viewers internalize or resist these portrayals. Finally, rapidly evolving digital platforms and content trends may produce representations that were not captured within the timeframe of this study.

Implications and Future Directions

Media deification acts as moral control. It limits acceptable femininity while masking inequalities as empowerment. The portrayal of women in Indian media has undergone apparent transformation, yet its ideological foundation remains strikingly consistent. Representation must move toward authentic complexity. Some of the future research must critically examine the commodification of feminism in



contemporary digital and streaming cultures, particularly influencer narratives and algorithm driven visibility that reshape the understanding of empowerment and femininity. Future research should also include audience reception studies and cross-cultural analysis of reverence as control. It should include real life studies on how deification may also trap women in a new kind of pedestal one that denies them vulnerability and complexity. By combining academic critique with actionable strategies, the field can move toward representations that balance artistic expression with ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

Deification of women in media celebrates endurance and sacrifice but denies autonomy. Society cannot deify women as goddesses and expect them to excel in every role without exhaustion or guilt for choosing themselves. The cultural insistence that a woman must "have it all" and "do it all" only perpetuates burnout, not empowerment. Media circulates sanitized empowerment reinforcing purity ideals. While media and digital platforms have expanded the visibility of women's stories, the pressure to embody perfection, multitasking, and moral virtue persists. Artistic freedom is essential, but with representation comes responsibility. Recognising these patterns is not to condemn artistic imagination, but to reimagine it toward narratives that affirm women as complex individuals rather than eternal ideas. A distorted image of feminism is the other end of patriarchy. From fearless action heroines to self sacrificing mothers, the modern media woman is expected to embody strength, morality, beauty, and wisdom, all in one. This glorification is often framed as empowerment but at what cost? True liberation lies in humanizing the goddess valuing imperfection and authenticity over divinity.

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