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## Love, Power, and Gender: Representing Romantic Relationships in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema (2013–2023)

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### ABSTRACT

In societies where popular media have mass influence, cinema has a great influence in forming cultural perception, emotional values and gender ideologies. In India, Bollywood has been a cultural institution that has been creating and propagating concepts of romance, manhood, womanhood for long. This paper aims to discuss gender roles and romantic relationships depicted in selected Bollywood movies that have been released from 2013 to 2023 using qualitative content analysis. The study is based on six popular films which are Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani (2013), Tamasha (2015), Ae Dil Hai Mushkil (2016), Kabir Singh (2019), Gehraiyaan (2022) and Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani (2023) and how the idea of love, showing emotion, sacrifice, agency and power are defined within a romantic narrative in contemporary Hindi cinema. The study uses the frame of reference of Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory, Stuart Hall's theories of Representation and Gerbner's Cultivation Theory to explore the ideological messages that are contained in film representations of men and women. The analysis is based on the following themes: gendered agency, emotional labor, consent, power relations, and reinforcement or undermining of traditional gender stereotypes. The results show that current Bollywood films increasingly try to portray complex and independent women but



there are a large number of films that continue to normalize the unequal distribution of emotional labor, possessiveness, emotional control, and male dominance in relationships. At the same time, some movies defy gender binary norms with more nuanced and mutually fulfilling relationships. The study upholds that Bollywood romance films do not just entertain but are also a cultural document that constructs and normalizes social concepts of gender and intimacy. This paper analyzes the transformation of the romantic relationship in the modern Hindi cinema, which is important for the larger themes and debates in media studies, gender studies, popular culture, and the representation of ideology in Indian society.

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## Introduction

Cinema is known to be one of the most influential cultural institutions of the modern society, which affects the imagination of the society, the values of the society, and the perception of society's members about each other. Cinema is not just a place to take a break, but also a significant ideological device that is shaped by and expresses identity, gender, class and relationships. The role of Bollywood in the Indian context is very special as it is a huge hit and even evokes emotions in the audience across generations. Hindi films reflect the social world as well as contribute to the construction and normalization of cultural conceptions of love, manhood, womanhood, marriage and intimacy. Bollywood film is a cultural site where fantasies and aspirations, social anxieties are negotiated through melodrama and romance, as Dwyer (2006) argue.

Love story is one of the major themes of Bollywood films since many years. Bollywood has created stories for the idealized and sacrificially romanticized love of previous decades and the romantically complex urban love of today's films to shape the acceptable expressions of masculinity and femininity. Male characters are traditionally portrayed as strong, self-controlled, possessive and authoritative, and female characters are traditionally portrayed as caring, forgiving, emotional and giving up. These representations are not just a matter of representation, but also a matter of ideology, which in turn shapes the larger picture of gender roles in the society. Laura Mulvey (1975) had the idea that the male gaze would control the perception of women in the mainstream cinema, which would be seen as objects for visual pleasure and passive recipients of male desire, thus reinforcing the patriarchal structures in the



visual culture. While the film industry in Bollywood has changed over the years, it has been doing this in so many ways, through romantic stories, songs, and character designs.

In cultural and media studies, the subject of media representation and social perception has been debated. Representation is not just a reflection on reality, but an active process of meaning creation using language, images, and cultural codes, Stuart Hall (1997) tells us. Cinema thus is not only about the portrayal of love and gender relations but also the ways in which people experience love, behave emotionally and have expectations about relationships. The frequency of these roles of dominant masculinity, emotional dependency, female sacrifice and possessive romance helps to normalize these relationships in society. This is further supported by George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1976), which proposes that the constant repetition of certain media images over time will lead to certain changes in audience's perception of social reality. The theory was originally established in the context of the study of television, but it is also applicable to the understanding of how films represent intimacy and gender.

There has been a lot of research done on Gender portrayal in Indian cinema and its socio-cultural implications. The Bollywood movies often use stereotypical images of men and women that propagate heterosexist ideology and gender hierarchy (Viridi 2003). Likewise, Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004) note that Hindi popular films frequently convey male emotional hegemony and have women as characters who are sacrificed, moralized, and emotionally accommodated. This also indicates the fact that the romantic storylines of popular Indian cinema continue to reinforce the power imbalance, including the male possessiveness and female submission as “true love”.

Recent work in the field has shifted the focus of research to the new gender dynamics in digital age Bollywood cinema. The globalization, urbanization and evolving social aspirations have led to an increasingly complex depiction of women and modern relationships in Indian cinema, as pointed out by scholars like Banaji, 2006 and Dhareshwar and Niranjana, 1996. Studies of gender and media representation have also underscored the ways in which gender is currently being negotiated in film, between progressive notions and traditional cultural values. Some of the recent Bollywood productions have featured strong, independent, professionally driven female characters, but most stories still have emotional work and compromising relationships largely defined by female characters. Furthermore, Kabir Singh (2019) has been a cause for concern because it romanticizes the issues of toxic masculinity, aggression and possessiveness in mainstream films.

Although the subject of gender and cinema has gained increased scholarly interest, there is a significant lack of qualitative research, specifically on romantic relationship narratives in modern Bollywood films.



Most of the earlier research either looks at the representation of women as a whole, or into audience reception as a separate entity, but fails to explore the issue of the representation of romance itself as a site of constructing gender ideology. Moreover, not much has been done to compare the films of these decades side by side, especially those from Bollywood, considering the rapid changes in socio-cultural values that took place during this period, like the advent of OTT platforms, feminist talk, and discussions of consent and emotional equality. This study aims to fill this gap by carrying out a qualitative content analysis of some selected Bollywood movies which were released from 2013 to 2023.

Over the past few decades, Bollywood films have experienced significant changes as a result of globalization, digital streaming services, altered urban attitudes and shifting public opinion on gender equality and consent. Emotionally sensitive men, independent working women and more complex relationships are portrayed in the growing number of contemporary films. Movies like *Tamasha* (2015), *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani* (2023) show the characters struggling with the issue of identity, emotional misfits, job aspirations, and modern relationship fears. At the same time, Bollywood movies, such as *Kabir Singh* (2019), are still glorifying aggressive masculinity, possessiveness and unequal power dynamics, which have brought forth a lot of public and academic discussion in the country. This combination of the progressive and regressive gender discourses allows us to understand the ambivalence of the contemporary Bollywood film industry, in which the process of modernization can still be caught in traditionalist patriarchal discourses.

The purpose of this study is to be critically analyzing the portrayal of gender roles and romantic relationships in six popular Bollywood films of the past decade (2013-2023) namely *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (2013), *Tamasha* (2015), *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (2016), *Kabir Singh* (2019), *Gehraiyaan* (2022), and *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani* (2023). The paper examines and applies the qualitative content analysis to explore the themes of emotional expression, consent, agency, sacrifice, power, and gender stereotypes in romantic stories. This study is an attempt to find out if modern Bollywood films perpetuate the traditional views of the male gender or provide alternative and progressive perspectives on gender and intimacy of love, based on the theory of Mulvey, Stuart Hall and Gerbner that will be grounded in the above theories. In so doing, the paper has made a contribution to the larger academic debate about the role of the media, gender politics, popular culture and the ideological role of the cinema in the modern Indian society.



## Research Methodology

This study uses the qualitative research method to analyze the depiction of the role of women and love in modern Indian films made in Hindi or Bollywood. The study is mainly a qualitative content analysis, which is used to interpret the construction of masculinity and femininity, love, expression of emotions, sacrifice, consent, and the power dynamic of relationship in selected Bollywood films. Qualitative content analysis is a method that allows for a detailed and interpretive analysis of a film text, which is used to uncover recurring themes, patterns, an ideology, and representations in the narratives, conversations, visual depictions and relationship dynamics of the characters.

The films selected for the study are from the Bollywood movie domain and are of the mainstream genre, and are published between 2013 to 2023 including *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (2013), *Tamasha* (2015), *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (2016), *Kabir Singh* (2019), *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani* (2023). The following films were chosen using purposive sampling with the following criteria:

1. The importance of romantic relationships in the story,
2. Popularity and Cultural reception by Indian consumers, and
3. substantial involvement with gendered relationship dynamics, and
4. Modern urban and middle class romantic experiences represented.

Together, the films depict a wide variety of romances, including idealized love, emotional reliance, and the new romantic relationships with a greater focus on individuality, emotional strife, and changing gender roles. The decade from 2013 to 2023 was selected for the analysis of the changing representations of cinema because of the dramatic digital shift, the growing influence of OTT platforms, the feminist discourse, and the rising public discourse around consent, emotional equality and gender politics in India during that decade.

The theoretical approaches to the study are based on three main theories: Laura Mulvey's theory of Male Gaze (written in 1975), Stuart Hall's theory of Representation (written in 1997), and George Gerbner's theory of Cultivation (written in 1976). Using Mulvey's framework, the visual and narrative representations of female characters in romantic narratives are explored and examined, with a particular focus on the themes of desire, objectification, and male subjectivity. Hall's theory helps to explain how meanings and ideologies of masculinity, femininity and relationships are constructed in the cinema using cultural codes and their structures. Gerbner's Cultivation Theory offers explanations of the effects of



repeated messages in film on the normalization of specific gender roles and romantic ideals in popular culture.

Thematic coding categories are employed for analysis in this study and are based on the literature that has been reviewed regarding gender representation and romantic narrative in films. The films were shown and analyzed again and again on the following categories of analysis:

- Gendered Character Agency
- Expressing feelings and sharing weaknesses
- Representation of Consent
- The dynamics of power in romantic relationships.
- To sacrifice and to be emotionally exhausted.

The films were then analyzed from an interpretive perspective of character behavior, dialogues, narrative development, visual framing and relations between characters within these selected categories. Specific focal points, repeated dialogue, symbolism, and pivot moments that conveyed ideologies of romance and genders were emphasized.

The study is not a statistical study, but rather an interpretive study. The goal isn't to make sweeping statements about audience response to film, but rather to explore the cultural discourses and ideologies that can be found in films. As a cultural document, film reflects and fosters social values, thus, the qualitative content analysis approach serves as an appropriate methodological approach for examining the nexus between media, gender and romantic ideology in contemporary Bollywood cinema.

While the study offers rich data on the portrayal of gender in some selected films, there are some points to note. The analysis is restricted to six Bollywood films in Hindi language and hence may not be exhaustive of the diversity of Indian cinema including regional film industries and independent productions. In addition, the interpretive aspect of qualitative analysis means that results of the analysis are also influenced by the contextual and theoretical readings instead of measurable responses from the audience. Despite this, the book provides insightful critical analysis of the negotiations of changing definition of masculinity, femininity, intimacy and power made by the Bollywood romance film in the modern Indian context.



## Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the representation of masculinity, femininity, and romantic relationships in selected Bollywood films released between 2013 and 2023.
2. To analyze how contemporary Bollywood cinema reinforces or challenges traditional gender stereotypes through themes of love, consent, emotional expression, sacrifice, and power dynamics.

## Theoretical Framework

The study is based on the ideas of both the media and the culture theory, which help to explain the process in which cinema builds, reproduces and normalizes the meanings of the gender within society. The present research makes use of three important theories: Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze theory, Stuart Hall's Representation theory, and George Gerbner's Cultivation theory, as Bollywood movies are not only media of entertainment but are also important cultural texts. The frameworks offer conceptual frameworks for the analysis of the depiction of romantic relationships, of masculinity and femininity, of emotional behavior and of power relations in selected Bollywood films.

## Male Gaze Theory

Derived from her landmark essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey's "Male Gaze" posits that the dominant film medium is constructed from a masculine perspective in which the female is often treated as an object of visual pleasure and not a subject in the story. The female characters in films can be interpreted through a heterosexual male gaze, according to Mulvey, because of the way the narrative and the camera are depicted, the character's dress and appearance, and the film's close-ups.

The male gaze is clearly reflected in Bollywood films, especially in the portrayal of feminine characters in the romantic songs, the framing that is almost always glamour-focused, and the stories that focus on the emotional journey of men rather than that of women. Gender roles are often portrayed as a focus on women's role as emotionally supportive, beautiful, and sacrificing, and granting more narrative agency and psychological complexity to male protagonists. The recent movies like *Kabir Singh* and *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* beautifully depict how men's desires, emotional pain, and possessiveness tend to take over love stories. This theoretical approach provides an opportunity to explore how Bollywood films are currently depicting women, and whether newer Bollywood films are challenging the older visual conventions of gender stereotyping.



## **Representation Theory**

Stuart Hall's Representation Theory focuses on the fact that the media not only reflects reality, but also actively creates meaning based on language, symbols, images and cultural codes (Hall, 1997). Representation is therefore an ideological one since multiple depictions in media give rise to collective identities, understandings of gender, relationships and social norms over time.

In the context of Bollywood cinema, this theory proposes that the constant portrayal of a dominant masculinity, sacrifice of women in the name of emotions, possessive love and heteronormative romance help normalize certain ideals of relationship. Representing men as decision-makers and women as accommodating partners in films repeatedly can enable the patriarchal expectation in society. Meanwhile, modern films showing men extrovert or female characters independent of their man can break away from the stereotypes and present other models of gender relations.

This frame is important for this present study because it allows for an analysis of the meanings of romance, consent, jealousy, emotional labor and power dynamics in the narrative of a film. Bollywood films are a cultural text that is represented in society, reflecting and influencing its perspectives on gender.

## **Cultivation Theory**

The Cultivation Theory was proposed by Gerbner & Gross (1976) which states that, over time, messages in the media shape viewers' perspectives on social reality. The theory states that constant viewing of the same stories and symbols creates shared worldviews in viewers (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

The theory was first developed in relation to TV but it is relevant in studying modern film culture. The glorification of obsessive love, male dominance, emotional repression or female sacrifice in Bollywood films can help normalize these behaviours in relationships in the Indian context. In romantic films, if someone is persistent, it's because they really love you and if the person gets jealous, it is because he/she is feeling the love more intensely. If the person sacrifices, he/she is devoted to you.

The present work does not measure direct effects of the audience, but rather examines how repeated representations in films contribute to larger cultural constructions of romantic ideologies and gender expectations. The study looks into the patterns observed in the selected films and investigates the role of Bollywood in perpetuating or challenging the dominant cultural discourses on relationship and gender roles.



### **Theoretical Framework is relevant to the study**

These theoretical approaches form a multi-dimensional analysis of the representation of gender in Bollywood movies. Male Gaze Theory helps to analyze issues of visual objectification and positioning of the story; Representation theory to analyze the meaning making around gender and romance in cinema and Cultivation theory to analyze the cultural significance of recurring cinematic patterns.

Through this analysis, the study examines the continuation of patriarchal values of romance in modern Bollywood films from 2013 to 2023 and/or any shift towards newer and more equal notions of gender and romance in the Indian popular culture.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani (2013): Individual Aspirations, Modern Femininity, and Negotiated Romance**

In 2013, Ayan Mukerji's film *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* is one of the Bollywood films that holds a special place in the modern romance genre as it deals with the dreams of young people, self-discovery, and the evolution of romantic relationships amongst the urban Indian millennials. The film offers a conflict between personal desire and romantic investment, as opposed to romantic stories, where love is the ultimate aspiration. The film explores the negotiation of modern relationships through the characters of Bunny (Kabir Thapar) and Naina Talwar. Bunny is a symbol of modern manly spirit, the type of man who is ambitious, adventurous and free of personal restrictions. The idea of identity of the traditional Bollywood hero is defined by family obligations and romantic love, but Bunny's is rooted in self-fulfillment and international travel. The dreams of his exploring the world and traveling show a shift in the dreams of the young people of urban India. But the film also exposes some of the human weaknesses of this hyper-individualistic life. Yet, despite his achievement and independence, Bunny suffers from emotional loneliness and can't form any personal relationships. His character therefore embodies the struggle between striving male and emotional fulfillment. Naina Talwar is one of the most important women in Bollywood romance today. Naina is initially described as an academically focused, introverted, and socially reserved young woman, a journey of self-discovery which questions the usual conception of femininity. While the stories of women such as the protagonists of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* are mostly about love, Naina's journey is about self-awareness and self-expression. Her travels are a sign of the modern times and the empowerment of women, where personal growth comes before romantic success.



The movie presents a new image of the modern Indian female aspirant, according to Stuart Hall's Representation Theory. Not only is Naina not a passive recipient of the attention of the boy, but she also takes initiative in her career, friendships and relationships. Most of all, she doesn't give up on her personal goals for the sake of romantic attachment. This is a look at women that breaks away from conventional gender roles which may be defined as victim or dependent partners.

The love story between Bunny and Naina also depicts changing gender roles in Bollywood films. Their relationship is different from the ones that are based on male dominance and female submissiveness, as they negotiate, stay emotionally mature and respect each other. Naina is always making her emotional needs and expectations heard, while Bunny shows signs of emotional avoidance and commitment anxiety. She isn't waiting for a romantic validation, but rather values her own worth and independence. This is a change from the previous Bollywood heroines who were more focused on falling for men.

Male Gaze Theory is an interesting theory proposed by Laura Mulvey to look at the film. While Naina is transformed in terms of appearances to meet the standard of the conventional beauty she has in mainstream cinema her worth in the story exceeds her physical appearance. The film gives her a lot of story dominance and emotion, treating her not as a mere sex object but as a full-fledged character. Thus, even though there is a lingering male gaze, the film is also a more complex and self-contained image of womanhood.

Additionally, the film challenges the traditional Bollywood idea that love must lead to sacrifice or dependence. Rather, *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* proposes that healthy relationships involve personal growth, emotional compatibility and understanding. The eventual marriage of Bunny and Naina is no merger of two halves, but rather recognition, on the part of both, of their emotional needs and personal desires. This is in line with new ideals in towns and cities that equate with the notion that love affairs are collaborations among equals instead of a hierarchy.

As a product of Cultivation Theory, the movie helps to normalize today's relationship ideals for the youth. It is the picture of romance that is side by side with one's ambition, self-discovery, and individual freedom. Meanwhile, it reaffirms some middle-class urban ambitions that link with mobility, career achievements, and cosmopolitan lifestyles. The film then reflects progressive gender values, but these are predominantly those of privileged youth from cities.

*Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* was, in a nutshell, the turning of a new page in the evolution of Bollywood romance and gender. It defies some of the common stereotypes in that it features an independent female



protagonist as well as a male character that slowly becomes emotionally responsible. The final message of the film is that love should be based on respect, self-development, and emotional equality, establishing it as a significant film in the context of shifting depictions of gender and love in modern Hindi movies.

### **Kabir Singh (2019): Toxic Masculinity and Possessive Romance**

In *Kabir Singh* (2019), the one of the most discussed masculine characters of Bollywood cinema in recent times is Sandeep Reddy Vanga. The movie is about Kabir, a very aggressive, emotional and moody medical student whose love affair with Preeti takes a central role in his life and emotions. The film's narrative form, frame and characterization serve to normalize possessiveness, emotional aggression, and male dominance as a way of expressing intense love. The character of Kabir is depicted as having an authoritarianism, impulsivity and emotional instability but these are repeatedly romanticized throughout the film. The violent outbursts, controlling behaviour and obsessiveness towards Preeti are hardly checked within the film form. Rather, his aggression is seen as proof of his depth of feeling and manhood. This is more representative of a trend in Bollywood films which glorifies and romanticizes the toxic male behavior as legit in the name of love.

Taking Laura Mulvey's "Male Gaze Theory" into account, the film definitely emphasizes the psychological and emotional journey of the male lead. Preeti is mostly used as an instrument of Kabir's emotional journey. There is not much agency in her story, as she goes silent and accepts Kabir's approach to her. Her figure is often captured in soft-focus close-ups and idyllic visualizations, which further establishes her as a desired object instead of a self-sufficient person.

Stuart Hall's Representation Theory is another way of explaining the repeated depiction of obsessive masculinity and its normalization of unequal relationship dynamics. The movie creates an idealized romance in which men's feelings of anger, jealousy and supremacy are acceptable forms of love. Such representation is of cultural significance as cinema is a potent space of meaning making in Indian society. Raising awareness of problematic relationship understandings through glorification of emotionally destructive masculinity can be reinforced to the audience.

The portrayal of consent in *Kabir Singh* is also very problematic. There are a number of scenes that cross the line between affection, authority and coercion. Kabir's possessive attitude is portrayed in a romantic light not a critical one which lessens the importance of respect and autonomy in relationships. The film tries to show Kabir as an emotionally wounded, vulnerable character but this vulnerability does not



present a serious threat to the power of patriarchy. Rather, it is frequently used as an excuse for his actions.

The fact that Kabir Singh has become popular shows the on-going cultural acceptance of the patriarchy's romantic ideals in mainstream Indian cinema. The movie has received backlash for its portrayal of toxic masculinity, and its success shows that narratives surrounding aggression and emotional control continue to be linked to masculinity's perceived desirability. The film is thus a significant cultural artifact to understand the negotiation of masculinity, romance and gender power in contemporary Bollywood.

### **Tamasha (2015): Emotional Vulnerability and Alternative Masculinity**

Unlike mainstream Bollywood romances, Imtiaz Ali's *Tamasha* (2015) is a more nuanced and introspective exploration of masculinity. The movie is about Ved, who is in a bind between his view of identity, his ability to express emotions and his role models of success and manhood as expected by society. Journey of Ved is much more psychological, much more emotionally fragile, as compared to dominant male protagonists who have authority by means of aggression or control.

The movie breaks from the norm of how men are supposed to be, in that it shows emotion as an important part of masculinity. Ved feels alienated because of the demands of conforming to the socially acceptable definition of masculinity connected to professional success, emotional restraint and stability. He suffers emotional episodes and identity crisis breaking the stereotype of the emotionally unbreakable male character of film.

In this respect, the female protagonist, Tara, plays an important role to facilitate Ved's self-realization. But unlike the female characters of patriarchy, which are subservient and have no voice, Tara is emotionally independent and has agency. She challenges Ved's "performative" identity and presses him to face his true self. They don't dominate or submit each other; they're in an emotional understanding and psychological companionship.

In terms of Representation Theory, *Tamasha* creates a new paradigm of "masculinity" that celebrates emotional openness and self-discovery instead of dominance. The movie subverts the traditional Bollywood hero role by presenting the idea that being "cold" can have a negative impact on one's psyche. The film takes a critical look at society's norms which make it difficult for men to show vulnerability through Ved's character.



The film also gives a subtle critique to the male gaze. Tara is visually expressed in the romantic visual style of cinema, but she is more than a sexually desirable woman. She is a character with intellectual and emotional awareness that plays a role in the narrative aside from Ved's desires. Aside from the more traditional romantic stories where the female part is there for the male hero's emotional journey, this one is different.

Furthermore, Tamasha is a depiction of urban relationship changes in the current Indian society. The movie presents love as a non-sacrifice and non-possessive experience, rather than the sacrificing and possessing of love. The change is a larger evolution in certain areas of Bollywood films where the depiction of relationship has begun to change from melodramatic idealization to a psychological realism.

But the plot of the film is more or less about Ved's emotional metamorphosis, despite the progressive aspects of the film. Though important, Tara's part takes a secondary role to the male protagonist's journey. So the film's content is an attempt to question the patriarchy in part, but not in its entirety.

### **Ae Dil Hai Mushkil (2016): Unrequited Love and Gendered Emotionality**

In Ae Dil Hai Mushkil (2016), director Karan Johar delves into the themes of love, emotional dependence and romantic obsession in modern-day city-to-city relationships. Ayan, an emotionally involved young man, becomes the focus of his feelings of love and identity through his relationship with Alizeh. The emotional vulnerability of men is portrayed, but at the same time, gendered norms of emotional labour and love fulfillment are reinforced.

The character of Ayan is more feminine, gentle and expressive than the aggressive male protagonist. He openly shares heartbreak, emotional neediness, and yearning. This depiction goes against the typical ideas of what men should and should not do when it comes to their emotions. But his emotional anguish is also romanticized and elevated to the heroic and deep level, placing male emotional pain at the heart of the narrative.

Alizeh, however, is seen as self-reliant, self-aware, and rejecting traditional romantic ideals. She restates her limits with Ayan and declines his romantic overtures simply because he can feel love for her. This portrayal is the inclusion of female autonomy and emotional agency in the Bollywood mainstream romance.

The film may be analyzed using Hall's Representation Theory, which explains how traditional and modern conceptions of romance co-exist. It upsets the notion that women need to pay off male



perseverance with a romantic embrace, but it also perpetuates the dominance of male emotional anguish as the main emotional element of the story.

Romantic idealizations also come from the film's visuals. The pain of the emotions is heightened in music, cinematography, and words, and heartbreak is made into emotional theater. This is in keeping with Bollywood's tradition of glorifying emotional pain as proof of true love.

On the other hand, at the same time *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* critiques on possessive romance in a better way than many mainstream films. Alizeh's rejection of Ayan's emotional needs highlights the need for emotional boundaries and personal freedom. The film takes aim at the traditional romantic story line, one in which perseverance will inevitably lead to a happy ending, but accepts that love can be unrequited.

However, the film does not change the overall gender stereotypes that women must be the ones who provide the emotional understanding and support to emotionally unwell men. The emotional labourer is often Alizeh, who does not get the same emotional recognition or support from Ayan. Therefore, the depiction of relationships in the movie is progressive, but the movie is still operating within some sort of emotional traditionalism that is partly patriarchal.

### **Gehraiyaan (2022): Female Desire, Emotional Complexity, and Modern Relationships**

*Gehraiyaan* (2022) is a major departure from the conventional Bollywood romantic film as it focuses on the desire of women, their emotional unsettlement, and their psychological complexities. The film delves into the complexities of urban relationships, addressing the subjects of infidelity, intimacy, trauma, and emotional distance with a more realistic and complex tone.

The central female character, Alisha, is a complex and ambiguous character. Unlike traditional female characters that are often limited to a nurturing or sacrificial role, Alisha has sexual agency, emotional complexity and personal ambition. Her desires and emotional struggles become main story issues instead of side emotional elements.

The film offers a critique of patriarchal constructions of femininity by granting its female character, a morally ambiguous space usually reserved for males. The narrative does not idealize or demonize Alisha's actions, but rather depicts her as a complex, psychologically troubled character who is troubled by trauma, insecurity and emotional discontent.

In terms of the Male Gaze Theory, it is observed that *Gehraiyaan* disturbs the traditional visual objectification in part. The images in the film are intimate and sensual, but it's not a film about women's



bodies for the pleasure of men. Rather, intimacy is linked to emotional fragility, isolation and psychological strain. This is a more feminine depiction of female desire.

Representation Theory also contributes to the understanding of how the film reflects the changing relationship cultures in urban India in the present context. Relationships are depicted as turbulent, challenging to the mind, driven not only by social responsibility or moral righteousness, but also by individual desires. Overall, this movie mirrors changes in the middle-class urban attitude towards intimacy and gender roles.

Significantly, Gehraiyaan also addresses harmful emotional dependence and unprocessed trauma in a relationship. The characters experience difficulties in communicating, a lack of security and emotional manipulation, showing the psychological impact of the instability of modern relationships. The film is not like a typical Bollywood story, where emotional conflicts are resolved by sacrifice or marriage, but it is an ambiguous and emotional story.

The urban elite setting of the film, however, restricts the film's gender politics from being universal. Empowerment continues to be strongly linked with privilege, modernity and metropolitan lifestyles. However, Gehraiyaan is important in bringing some more psychological dimensions to the depiction of women and relationships in the mainstream Hindi film industry.

### **Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani (2023): Negotiating Tradition and Progressive Gender Politics**

Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani (2023) blends Bollywood melodrama at its core with current debates on gender parity, emotionalism, and the patriarchy within the household. The movie attempts to question the norms of masculinity and at the same time to praise emotional openness, female ambition and ideological resistance in relationships. Although a boyish character in terms of physicality and flamboyance, Rocky displays emotional sensitivity, loves women and treats them with respect. Rocky is a nuanced character who is vulnerable and emotionally sensitive, unlike dominant male protagonists who are unable to express such feelings. This is an assault on the traditional male gender ideology of emotional suppression and control. Rani, on the other hand, is a professionally ambitious, intellectually self-assured and political activist. She challenges the norms of patriarchal family life and does not conform to the norm of women who are supposed to be submissive. Rocky and Rani's connection is one of equal feeling and respect, not of control or sacrifice.

The film effectively challenges the patriarchal home system and is an expression of the inter-generational family relationship. Female characters assert their dominance over males, call into question gender



definitions, and refuse emotional restraints in the home. This is in keeping with Hall's Representation Theory; the movie is an active process of re-constructing the traditional gender norms in a mainstream medium of cinema.

Meanwhile, the movie has a few commercial Bollywood trademarks including melodrama, spectacle and emotional outpouring. Feminist ideas can be made more palatable to mainstream audiences by being woven into stories that entertain. But this also restricts the radicality of the critique because the critique does not challenge the patriarchal structures but rather challenges them.

It's an important time in Bollywood's history because it's a film in which emotions are no longer a taboo on the male end and women's independence has become the norm in the mainstream. It is rooted in culturally comfortable romantic frameworks and symbolizes wider social changes towards more egalitarian conceptions of relationship.

### **Comparative Discussion**

The analysis of the selected Bollywood films from 2013 to 2023 shows that there was a definite shift in the representation of gender and romantic relationships in the mainstream Hindi film industry. Although the patriarchy exists and traditional romanticism is alive and well, more recent Bollywood films show an awareness of consent, emotional vulnerability, female agency, and moral manhood. The chosen films collectively represent the presence of traditional gender discourses and new progressive stories in Indian popular culture.

The most salient result of the study is the continuation of the patriarchy in romantic narratives. One of the most significant achievements of movies like *Kabir Singh* is to make possessiveness, aggression, emotional outbursts and dominance of males as a sign of passionate love. Bollywood's glorification of obsessive masculinity is a continuation of the same tradition filmmakers have followed throughout their history, where male control in romantic relationships is romanticized and accepted as a natural and necessary part of the relationship. These depictions perpetuate inequities and normalize unhealthy relationship practices.

The study also reveals a shift in the portrayal of masculinity over time. *Tamasha*, *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani*, are some of the films that give us emotionally expressive and psychologically vulnerable protagonists, who are more inclined towards empathy, communication and emotional understanding than towards dominance and aggression. The change marks the changing perception of masculinity in cinema, which has become more open to emotions and a strong sense of right and wrong. These films don't just



show men as rulers but as men with a complex of emotions and a responsibility for their relation. Women's representation in the selected films also reveals significant transitions. In the past, Bollywood films portrayed women in stereotypical roles as supportive, sentimental or pretty. Although these stereotypic images are still present, more modern movies tend to show women as emotionally independent, having personal goals, wishes and psychological depth. Females like Alisha (Gehraiyaan) and Rani (Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani) break the traditional roles given to women and assert their emotional independence.

But the study also shows how empowerment of women in Bollywood can be negotiated and conditional within acceptable cultural limits. In more modern stories, the ability of women to act is often expressed in terms of their emotional trauma, their struggles in relationships, or their compromises. For example, although Gehraiyaan emphasizes the desire and emotional complexity of women, empowerment remains within elite urban settings. Likewise, in Ae Dil Hai Mushkil, there is autonomy in the women, but the emotional tone is still mostly rooted in the male suffering, sexual satisfaction.

The other important finding is about the representation of consent and emotional ethics of the relationships. The concept of traditional Bollywood romance has often crossed the line between making love and making love good for love, and this often involves persistence, jealousy, emotional manipulation and pressure being considered the hallmarks of love. The analysis suggests that consent is now being discussed more deliberately in recent movies.

The study also shows the Bollywood movies today mirror the cultural conflicts in Indian society. While on the one hand, films are still reproducing patriarchy related values that are embedded in the social structure, on the other hand, there is an increasing recognition of the changing gender expectations among urban audience. This ambivalence produces stories of which either the forward-looking or the commercial identity prevails. Many films try to do both; as a result, there is an attempt to maintain a balance between feminist voices and the traditional romantic formula in order to keep the film culturally and commercially acceptable.

On a theoretical level, the Male Gaze Theory of Laura Mulvey is still relevant to the discussion of the visual representation of female characters as desirability, emotional accessibility. But some films like Gehraiyaan or Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani partially contest this gaze by letting the women to have more narrative and emotional subjectivity. Representation Theory by Stuart Hall also helps to illuminate the social implications that are attached to recurring images of masculinity, femininity and romantic attitudes in the films. Overall, the chosen movies demonstrate that Bollywood does not only provide



entertainment, but that it is also a cultural institution which plays a role in the construction of social knowledge and meaning about gender and relationships.

The concept of recurring romantic tropes also helps to explain how certain relational ideals are justified and normalized within popular culture as George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory suggests. The same message of male emotional domination, female sacrifice and possessive love has been repeated for decades in the Bollywood films, which might impact how the society views “ideal” love. At the same time, the rise of narratives that are on an emotionally balanced and consent basis indicates a cultural shift towards more healthy and equal models of relationships.

The results indicate that Bollywood cinema is in a transitional period at the moment. There continues to be a fusion of traditional patriarchal romantic narratives and newer ones that focus on emotional equality, female agency and ethical intimacy. While the representations are uneven and occasionally 'commercialized', they show an important shift in the ambience of cultural politics of representation of gender in modern Hindi film industry.

## **Conclusion**

The present study analyzed the portrayal of gender roles and romantic relationships in some Bollywood movies produced from 2013 to 2023 using the qualitative content analysis approach. The study was conducted using the theory of Laura Mulvey, “Male Gaze Theory”, George Gerbner “Cultivation Theory” and Stuart Hall “Representation Theory” to examine the process of how the Bollywood cinema of the present day builds up the meaning of masculinity, femininity, love, emotional expression, consent and power dynamics in relationships.

The results indicate that Bollywood is still functioning within a very gendered narrative frame where the notion of romantic narratives, which are rooted in patriarchy, are still predominant. Toxic masculinity is perpetuated in films like Kabir Singh, where the violence, possessiveness and the control of emotions are glorified, and the female characters are often depicted in a supportive or passive manner. Representations in this way serve to normalize unequal emotional and relational dynamics.

Concurrently, the current study also highlights the changing trends in the Bollywood films of the present era. Tamasha, Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani, are films which question the traditional notions of masculinity by depicting men as emotionally expressive, empathic and 'ethical'. Likewise, movies such as Gehraiyaan highlight the female agency, womanhood, and psychological depth that are absent in the



conventions of femininity. There are clear signs of an evolving film industry's interest in issues of equality, emotional wellbeing and moral connection.

The study also finds that the progressive representation of gender in Bollywood sometimes is partial and negotiated. Autonomy and emotional equality of women happens more and more, but often in commercially safe and culturally acceptable frameworks. Many films still carry with them the legacy of their patriarchal roots, in terms of narrative endings, emotional frameworks and romantic ideologies. Therefore, there is gender reinforcement and a slow cultural change at Bollywood as well.

The study is part of the growing body of work on gender and representation in Indian cinema and provides insight into how the contemporary Bollywood film deals with the shifting dynamics of social attitudes towards relationships and identities. It shows how cinema does not just reflect society, but is also partly a medium in itself for making and disseminating cultural meaning in relation to love, gender and emotions.

While it only entails six select films and the interpretive methods that are qualitative, it provides valuable insights into the changing politics of representation in major Hindi cinema. The scope of the research could be extended in future to study regional cinema, the reception of the film, OTT platforms, queer representation or comparative study of Bollywood and World cinema.

To sum up, Bollywood cinema of the last decade, from 2013 to 2023, portrays a transitional cultural scene in which traditional conventions of romantic love and male supremacy still exist, while new forms of love and female agency are also coming to the fore. A gradual development towards more sophisticated and ethically sensitive depictions holds the promise of a cinematically more progressive future, while mainstream films grapple with the tensions between commercial entertainment and social change.

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