

Evolution of Female Desire and Fantasy in Bollywood Cinema: Perspectives from Male and Female Directors in the Post-Liberalization Era

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Abstract

The camaraderie between cinema and fantasy has a prolonged story, as one escalates the other. Since echoes of 'sexual fantasies' and 'gaze' in cinema have been primarily celebrated and fantasized through patriarchal prisms, Bollywood and female desire have historically been fraught with challenges. However, Bollywood cinema has lately been undergoing significant landscape twists by featuring female fantasies in a bold and progressive manner at the forefront of narratives. In light of this, drawing from theoretical perspectives on the male gaze and psychoanalytic feminism, this paper will examine the evolving representations of female desire, fantasy and sexuality in contemporary Bollywood cinema. Through a nuanced analysis of nine key Bollywood films from 1996 to 2023, this paper will compare male and female directors' approaches to the male gaze when depicting female desire and sexuality on screen, examining how filmmakers' personal perspectives shape cinematic portrayals. It will also consider how economic liberalization affected the representation of female sexual desires and fantasies in Bollywood cinema, emphasizing the intersection of culture, economics, and gender in Indian popular culture. To conclude, this paper will illuminate how Bollywood cinema has become a powerful platform for the exploration of female desire and fantasy, serving as a catalyst for social change and challenging conventional gender norms in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Bollywood; Female desire; Male gaze; Gender performativity; Psychoanalytic feminism

1. Introduction

Cinema has always been a crucial language for change, fantasy, freedom, liberty, and resistance. Over the years, cinema has become a potent agent of social change, which is "... not only about big revolutions, but also changes in the daily attitudes of the people" (Murthy, and Das 2011). As frames flicker and stories unfold, cinema becomes a conduit for expressing the unspoken, challenging structural norms, and envisioning alternate realities and/or fantasies. It invites the audience to embark on a journey of introspection, challenging preconceived notions and paving the way for a collective consciousness that embraces the

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relentless pursuit of a more just and liberated world. In light of this, the present paper aims to delve into the ways in which the representation of female desire and fantasy has undergone a profound transformation in Bollywood cinema in the post-liberalization era, an affectionate moniker for the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, India.

At the core of the Bollywood industry's commercial framework lies a reliance on gender conformity, predominantly shaped through the prism of masculinity (Samraat, 2021). For long, femininity has consistently found itself subjected to the prevailing dominance of masculine narratives, depicting the latter as superior and positioning the former as inferior and submissive (Yadav and Jha, 2023). The commercial success of Bollywood has long been tethered to the portrayal of masculinity, with the audience readily embracing and championing the archetypal hero. This trend and the prevailing (heterosexual) male gaze have played a significant role in normalizing the exploration of female desire and sexuality through the lens of the male perspective (Rane and Chowdhary, 2023). Since echoes of 'sexual fantasies' and 'gaze' in cinema have been primarily celebrated and fantasized through patriarchal prisms, Bollywood and female desire have historically been fraught with challenges.

Considering this, drawing from theoretical perspectives on "male gaze" and psychoanalytic feminist scholarship, this paper will examine the evolving representations of female desire and fantasy in post-liberalization Bollywood cinema. Through a nuanced analysis of nine key Bollywood films from 1996 to 2023, this paper will compare male and female directors' approaches to the male gaze when depicting female desire and sexuality on screen, examining how filmmakers' personal perspectives shape cinematic portrayals. It will also consider how economic liberalization affected the representation of female sexual desires and fantasies in Bollywood cinema, emphasizing the intersection of culture, economics, and gender in Indian popular culture. The research aims to address the following question: *How has the representation of female desire and fantasy evolved in post-liberalization Bollywood cinema in response to changing societal norms and cultural shifts?*

2. Literature Review

The representation of female desire, sexual fantasies, and gaze in Bollywood cinema has been a subject of scholarly inquiry for decades. Scholars such as Rane and Chowdhary (2023) have meticulously traced the evolution of this representation, particularly noting the prevalent portrayal of women as idealized objects of desire in pre-liberalization Bollywood films between the 1950s-1970s. These films often perpetuated a one-dimensional depiction of femininity, wherein women existed primarily for the pleasure and gaze of the male audience. Despite some alterations in stereotypical portrayal coinciding with the onset of the feminist movement in India, the male gaze persisted through new narratives and disguises, reinforcing traditional patriarchal ideals. In these early years, the films often portrayed female characters as embodiments of virtue and values, upholding patriarchal ideals of loyalty and obedience to their husbands. For example, notable films like *Dabej* (1950), *Gauri* (1968), and *Devi* (1970) depicted women as passive, submissive wives and martyrs dedicated to their families.

The lack of significant female participation in the Bollywood film industry, as highlighted by Samraat (2021), has played a critical role in perpetuating the aforementioned "problematic" portrayal of women. This is especially evident in the hypersexualization and objectification of female actors and dancers, particularly in "item" songs with derogatory lyrics. However, Shah and Cory (2019) offer opposing perspectives, implying that these performances, while



containing elements of subtly eroticized depictions of female bodies, can be powerful tools for empowering women and reclaiming narratives surrounding female sexuality and autonomy. Aligning with Judith Butler's conceptualization, they interpret these item songs as performative acts that actively shape feminine subjectivities within contemporary Indian society.

Kaur (2022) has discussed how the portrayal of female sexuality in Bollywood has undergone a transformative evolution, exploring the concepts of desire and eroticism across diverse dimensions. They argue that the shift was notably observed in the early 1970s through songs like 'Baahon Mein Chale Aa' (*Anamika*, 1973), where female voices subtly suggested an openness to sexual comfort. This marked a departure from earlier depictions, where female characters often resisted sexual advances, adhering to the 'damsel in distress' trope. In the early 2000s, songs like 'Zara Zara' (*Rehnaa Hai Terre Dil Mein*, 2001) further broke away from tabooed views, consistently expressing female characters' fantasies and establishing desire as belonging inherently to women. Kashyap (2018) documented that in 2018, there was another noticeable shift in Bollywood cinema regarding the portrayal of women's sexuality and desire, as the depiction of a woman's choice to explore her own sexual pleasures and fantasies became more mainstream.

A number of studies have been done on the shifting portrayal of women in Hindi cinema within the broader context of the liberalization of the Indian economy. This examination takes into account the socio-economic changes that accompanied India's economic liberalization in the 1990s and their impact on cinematic narratives and representations of gender. The liberalization policies initiated in the early 1990s brought about significant transformations in Indian society, including changes in consumption patterns, lifestyles, and aspirations. As the economy opened up to globalization and foreign investment, Bollywood also underwent a gradual evolution to cater to the changing tastes and preferences of a more cosmopolitan audience. In this context, scholars have analyzed the emergence of the "new woman" archetype, characterized by independence, ambition, and assertiveness, which became increasingly prevalent in films of the post-liberalization era. These female characters often navigated urban settings, pursued careers, and challenged traditional gender norms, reflecting the aspirations of a growing middle-class audience (Zafar and Batta, 2017). Furthermore, Nijhawan (2009) contends that the portrayal of these assertive 'new' women in certain Bollywood song sequences also marked a departure from previous norms of suppressing female desire.

When examining scholarly contributions on female desire and fantasies in Bollywood, it is essential to explore the on-screen representation of homosexuality and sexual/gender minorities as well. In light of this, Srinivasan (2011) opined that the explicit depiction of female desire in films like *Fire* (1996) and *Girlfriend* (2004) faced strong opposition due to societal resistance. Although works examining the representation of lesbianism in *Girlfriend* (2004) have glorified it as a revolutionary move, Kaur (2010) and Tejero (2016) pointed out that instead of challenging and subverting the dominant modes of representing lesbian women, the film has utilized and manipulated a set of visual stereotypes that have historically been linked to misogynistic and patriarchal perceptions of lesbian women as sexual outcasts. For instance, the author argues that the movie is tailored for a male target audience, presenting erotic lesbian scenes without any subversive elements that exploit female homosexuality for sensational purposes. In another interesting comparative study, Parveen and Mishra (2023)

elucidated how Hindi cinema has portrayed lesbianism during the criminalization of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and in the current post-decriminalization era by shedding light on the evolving societal attitudes towards female homosexuality.

Furthermore, Vagh (2021) has highlighted that on-screen portrayals of sex predominantly mirrored male fantasies through the male gaze, irrespective of the filmmaker's gender. The historical tendency to either dismiss female orgasms and sexuality as myths or trivialize them as punchlines is driven by male apprehension towards understanding or relinquishing control over these aspects. The author suggests that this persistence of the male gaze indicates a broader societal discomfort in openly acknowledging and addressing the role of desire in Indian cultural content, particularly concerning female sexuality. Furthermore, other prominent scholarly works (Gupta and Prakash, 2021; Ramkissoon; 2009; Saikia, 2021) have offered nuanced perspectives on the mainstream portrayal of womanhood, sexuality, and female desire in Bollywood films.

The above brief literature review indicates that, while extensive scholarly inquiry has been conducted on various aspects of representation of women in Bollywood cinema, there remains a notable research gap concerning the comparative approaches of male and female directors towards portraying female desire and fantasy on-screen. Additionally, while some scholars have discussed the impact of economic liberalization on Bollywood cinema, there is a notable absence of research focusing specifically on the evolution of the representation of female sexual desires and fantasies in this context. Examining how societal changes influenced cinematic narratives and imagery surrounding female sexuality could provide valuable insights into the intersection of culture, economics, and gender in Indian cinema. These lacunae indicate the need for further research that delves deeper into the comparative approaches of male and female directors, as well as the evolution of the representation of female sexual fantasies, desire, and gaze in Bollywood cinema since 1996, in connection to the liberalization of the Indian economy. This article will attempt to address these research gaps in the following sections.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This paper draws upon key theoretical concepts such as the "male gaze", and psychoanalytic feminism. The psychoanalytic concept of the "male gaze", as initially proposed by Laura Mulvey in her seminal work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), provides a foundational lens through which to examine how cinematic narratives shape and reinforce traditional gender roles. In the context of Bollywood, where the industry has historically catered to a predominantly male audience, understanding the nuances of the male gaze becomes paramount. Scholars like Vagh (2021) have highlighted the persistent influence of the male gaze in on-screen portrayals of sex, emphasizing the need to deconstruct these narratives to pave the way for more authentic and empowering representations of female desire.

From a feminist perspective, the male gaze theory can be examined through three lenses: first, in terms of how men observe women; second, in terms of how women perceive themselves; and finally, in terms of how women scrutinize other women. Hashmi (2020) observed examples illustrating that the male gaze often involve medium close-up shots capturing women from over a man's shoulder, scenes that pivot and linger on a woman's body, and scenarios frequently portraying a man actively observing a passive woman. In other words,



“... women’s bodies are objects that give pleasure through voyeuristic and fetishistic forms of scopophilia, pleasure in looking... The camera enacts the male gaze, panning up and down the woman’s body...” (Oliver 2017, 452).

Therefore, this perspective not only shapes how women are portrayed on screen but also influences the audience's understanding of gender roles and societal norms. The dualistic gaze, as outlined by Mulvey, involves the active male gaze, where the male viewer identifies with the male protagonist and objectifies female characters, and the passive female gaze, where female characters become objects of desire and identification. This dichotomy establishes a power imbalance that reinforces patriarchal norms and aligns with dominant cultural ideologies (Rane, and Chowdhary 2023). Mulvey's analysis probes into the concept of the "woman as image" and the "man as bearer of the look", illustrating how women often play passive roles, existing to be looked at and desired, while men wield the active gaze, steering the narrative's course.

Psychoanalytic feminism is interconnected with the concept of the male gaze, particularly in its examination of how unconscious processes and societal norms contribute to the construction of gender roles and power dynamics. It is an interdisciplinary framework merging psychoanalytic theory with feminist perspectives that explores the intersection of unconscious processes, societal norms, and the construction of gender identities. By drawing on psychoanalytic concepts, particularly those of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, this approach critically examines how cultural expectations and phallogocentric structures influence the development of individual subjectivities, emphasizing the impact of family, culture, and language on the formation of gender roles. Psychoanalytic feminism posits that men exhibit an inherent psychological inclination to subjugate women, attributing this compulsion to deeply rooted aspects of the human psyche (Pittet 2013). This feminist theory aims to comprehend the development of psychic lives to shed light on and transform women's oppression. The ultimate goal is societal change or a "cure" achieved by uncovering the origins of domination in men's psyche and subordination in women's, often residing in the unconscious (Wolff 2022). As applied to Bollywood cinema, this theoretical lens scrutinizes the symbolic representations, archetypes, and narratives that shape audience perceptions.

4. Methodology

In this qualitative and descriptive study, the case study method is employed, combining hermeneutics with visual analysis to delve into the evolving representation of female desire and sexual fantasies in selected Bollywood films. The study particularly focuses on film narrative structure (Jenkins 2023; Manzar, and Aravind 2019), investigating how the structure and composition of the story contribute to the portrayal of female desire. Character interactions (Luoying, Xu, and Luo 2020) are also examined to understand how relationships and power dynamics contribute to the overall narrative. This research is grounded in a feminist standpoint, recognizing the significance of gender perspectives in interpreting and critiquing the representation of female desire in Bollywood cinema. The feminist positionality of the authors further informs the analytical lens, acknowledging the dynamic interplay between personal experiences, societal contexts, and scholarly insights.

The selection of the nine films for analysis in this study is strategically guided by the aim of providing a comprehensive exploration of the evolving representation of female desire in Bollywood cinema. By spanning different eras and genres and covering diverse storytelling

styles, the chosen films offer a nuanced perspective on how the portrayal of female desire has evolved over time and varies across narrative contexts. For a comparative analysis of male and female directorial perspectives, out of the nine chosen films, four have been directed by male filmmakers and five have been directed by female filmmakers. The table below mentions the films under examination in this study:

Table 1. The films analyzed in this study

Film Title	Director	Release Year	Genre
<i>Fire</i>	Deepa Mehta	1996	Romance/ Drama
<i>Girlfriend</i>	Karan Razdan	2004	Romance/ Drama
<i>Julie</i>	Deepak Shivdasani	2004	Romance/ Thriller
<i>The Dirty Picture</i>	Milan Luthria	2011	Romance/ Biographical/ Drama
<i>Margarita with a Straw</i>	Shonali Bose	2014	Romance/ Drama
<i>Parched</i>	Leena Yadav	2015	Drama/ Comedy
<i>Lipstick under my Burkha</i>	Alankrita Shrivastava	2016	Drama/ Comedy
<i>Veere Di Wedding</i>	Shashanka Ghosh	2018	Female buddy/ Comedy
<i>The Mirror (Lust Stories 2)</i>	Konkona Sen Sharma	2023	Romance/ Drama

5. Evolution of Female Desire in Bollywood Cinema (1996-2024): A Comparative Analysis of Male and Female Directorial Perspectives

In every decade of the Bollywood industry, the majority of the movies have often leaned towards a pro-male narrative. From classics like *Sholay* (1975), *Deewar* (1975), and *Don* (1978) to later hits like *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), and *Dabangg* (2010), these films and their portrayal of male protagonists have played a crucial role in normalizing male sexual fantasies and desires. However, in recent years, there has been a gradual yet noteworthy shift in the content of Bollywood scripts. Women's sexual fantasies and desires, long shrouded in the context of men's pleasure and the male gaze, are now experiencing a resurgence in the era of neo-modernity. Breaking the glass ceiling and challenging male stereotypes in cinema, filmmakers have moved backstage issues surrounding women's pleasures and sexual fantasies to the forefront (Goffman 1956). In the following sections, this study will undertake a comparative analysis between films directed by male and female directors to explore potential differences in the portrayal of female desire and the extent of resistance against prevailing masculine narratives and the male gaze. Furthermore, the research will also consider the impact of economic liberalization on the portrayal of female desire in Bollywood cinema. The neoliberal policies initiated in the early 1990s brought about significant transformations in Indian society, including changes in consumption patterns, lifestyles, and aspirations. As the economy opened up to globalization and foreign investment, Bollywood underwent a gradual evolution to cater to the changing tastes and preferences of a more cosmopolitan audience. This study will explore how these socio-economic changes have influenced cinematic narratives and representations of gender, particularly in the context of female desire, thereby adding a nuanced understanding of the intersection between economics, gender, and cultural production in contemporary Bollywood cinema.



5.1. Bollywood Films by the Male For the Male: The Failure to Avoid the Male Gaze

Girlfriend (2004), directed by Karan Razdan, is one of the most popular Bollywood films from the post-liberalization era. In a bold attempt, the movie was set to explore themes of lesbianism against a backdrop of patriarchal and heteronormative societal expectations of the early 2000s. While the film breaks away from the conventional heterosexual love story, it fails to escape the trappings of the male gaze. The camera tends to linger on scenes of intimacy, catering to a voyeuristic gaze that can be uncomfortable for a viewer seeking a genuine exploration of homosexual relationships. To support this argument, scholars like Tejero (2016) have argued that *Girlfriend* overtly caters to a male target audience, inundating viewers with gratuitous lesbian scenes that lack any subversive depth. The erotic sequences, devoid of meaningful exploration, often come across as the imaginative fantasies or nightmares of ostensibly heterosexual protagonists. Razdan's use of lesbian intimacy becomes a tool for shock value rather than a means to challenge societal norms or question heteronormative expectations. Instead, it perpetuates a narrative that objectifies and sensationalizes lesbian love, ultimately contributing to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes rather than subverting them. It is crucial to point out that *Girlfriend* ended up suggesting homosexuality as something unnatural. The film portrays one of the main characters as having experienced sexual abuse during her childhood, implying that this traumatic experience is the reason for her comfort with same-sex relationships. While the director aimed to shed light on homosexuality, the unintended consequence is the representation that queer sexuality is not inherent but rather influenced by social circumstances or misfortune. Therefore, this paper argues that the film fails to engage in a meaningful exploration of female desire and fantasy in same-sex relationships.

Similarly, another popular movie, *Julie* (2004), directed by Deepak Shivdasani, attempted to challenge gender norms and societal expectations in post-liberalization India by portraying the narrative of a high-society sex worker. However, the narrative frequently positioned Julie more as a victim of circumstances than as an active agent shaping her own destiny. This fits into the narrative of male rescue fantasy, where men are positioned as saviors or protectors of vulnerable women. Moreover, Julie's identity as a sex worker becomes the central aspect of her gender performance, overshadowing other dimensions of her personality. This reductionist portrayal limits Julie's agency and reinforces stereotypes about women in sex work, perpetuating the notion that deviating from societal norms leads to tragic consequences, like ending up in prostitution. Furthermore, the supporting male characters in the film also conform to traditional gender stereotypes, exhibiting controlling and judgmental behavior towards Julie. These characters serve to reinforce normative notions of masculinity, which are presented as antagonistic towards Julie's autonomy and self-determination. Therefore, it becomes evident that *Julie* fails to effectively challenge gender norms and societal expectations. Instead, it perpetuates stereotypical representations of women, reinforcing existing power dynamics and undermining its potential as a feminist narrative.

Years later, in the cinematic exploration of Silk Smitha's life in *The Dirty Picture* (2011), directed by Milan Luthria, there emerges a narrative that ostensibly challenges traditional gender norms and societal expectations by portraying Smitha as a woman who boldly embraces her sexuality and defies conservative norms within the film industry. However, a critical feminist analysis reveals the pervasive presence of the male gaze throughout the film, undermining its potential

to offer a nuanced commentary on Smitha's objectification and exploitation within the industry. This is exemplified through the film's numerous item numbers and provocative scenes, which, while ostensibly aiming to depict the objectification faced by actresses, ultimately contribute to the perpetuation of the objectifying male gaze. Furthermore, the film's reliance on Smitha's sexuality as a central narrative device reinforces the stereotype that a woman's value in the industry is primarily contingent upon her physical attractiveness, thus perpetuating entrenched gender norms. Therefore, the dominance of the male gaze is palpable throughout the film, with scenes often crafted to cater to voyeuristic consumption rather than meaningful storytelling. Despite Vidya Balan's commendable portrayal, which imbues Smitha's character with authenticity, the film fails to provide a nuanced exploration of how objectification impacted Smitha personally and professionally. The narrative largely overlooks the psychological toll of constant objectification, reducing Smitha's experiences to mere plot points rather than delving into the complexities of her sexual desire, fantasy, and emotional journey.

When comparing the aforementioned films to *Veere Di Wedding* (2018), directed by Shashanka Ghosh, a recurring pattern emerges, indicating a pervasive issue within the portrayal of female desire, sexuality, and fantasies by male directors. Despite the film's purported boldness in exploring modern relationships through the perspectives of four female protagonists representing diverse facets of contemporary womanhood, the male director ultimately fails to break free from the entrenched stigma surrounding female sexuality. The portrayal of female desire within the film remains tethered to societal norms and expectations, hindering its potential to challenge stereotypes and promote genuine empowerment. A poignant example of this is the masturbation scene featuring Sakshi, which highlights the mishandling and commodification of female sexuality. Rather than presenting a nuanced exploration of female desire with openness and understanding, the scene is marred by Sakshi's embarrassment and the subsequent need to justify her actions to her friends. This instance underscores a missed opportunity to authentically portray female desire free from the constraints of the male gaze and societal taboos.

The persistence of this pattern for years, despite the passage of time and the socio-cultural shifts accompanying liberalization in the 1990s, underscores the inherent limitations of male directors in presenting issues of female desire and sexuality. By perpetuating the male gaze, these directors inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms and hinder progress towards genuine gender equality and representation in cinema. Therefore, it can be argued that the failure of all the aforementioned four male directors to effectively challenge the male gaze and provide nuanced portrayals of female desire and fantasy in their respective films underscores a broader issue within the film industry. Moreover, the lack of evolution in addressing the male gaze highlights a systemic issue within the film industry, where entrenched power dynamics and patriarchal structures continue to influence storytelling.

The context of liberalization in India adds another layer to the discussion of this problematic perpetuation of the male gaze and the objectification of women in cinema. Liberalization led to an influx of Western influences and a greater emphasis on market-driven approaches to filmmaking. This shift towards commercialization often prioritized sensationalism and spectacle over nuanced storytelling and social commentary. As a result, male filmmakers may have felt pressure to cater to mainstream tastes and sensationalize their narratives to attract audiences in a competitive market. Moreover, liberalization brought about changes in societal



attitudes towards gender roles and sexuality. While there were strides towards greater gender equality and women's empowerment, there were also reactionary forces that sought to uphold traditional patriarchal norms and values. In this context, the aforementioned four films may have both reflected and perpetuated prevailing attitudes towards gender and sexuality, often at the expense of authentic representation and feminist critique.

5.2. Bollywood Films by the Female for the Female: Breaking the Glass Ceilings

For the very first time, female directors forayed into Hindi parallel movies and led the path much ahead of its time in the early Indian post-liberalization era. Director Deepa Mehta struck the cord with her movie *Fire* (1996), which created a solid stir at that contemporary time. Director Mehta successfully catered her craft by breaking the glass ceilings and looking into society from the female point of view, shattering age-old patriarchal mirrors. Women's liberation and freedom in Indian society got exposed in terms of sexuality and desires through the movie, as it boldly pushed stereotypical boundaries about female sexuality and asserted an alternate discourse on heteronormativity. Deepa Mehta, for the very first time, uplifted the hidden feminine desires and hope from the female point of view by replacing the stereotypical male conventions. By bringing homosexual relationships in front of a wider society for the very first time, it transformed the typical mindset of the audiences and female liberations much ahead. The movie helped to unleash middle-class sexual desires and emotional bonding through the protagonists Radha and Sita and paved the way for the Bollywood industry to come up with more challenging content.

During the mid-second decade of the 21st century, another female director came into cinematic storytelling and enhanced the legacy of *Fire* in a much more contemporary, furnished and refreshed way. Director Shonali Bose ignited controversies through her film, *Margarita With a Straw* (2014), as she tried to portray her protagonist as a symbol of sexual hope by blending disability and complex character shades. The genre was something new at that time. This departure from conventional narratives surrounding disability contributes significantly to a more inclusive representation of diverse female experiences in cinema. The journey of a teenager with cerebral palsy becomes a catalyst for reshaping perceptions and fostering a more accepting and understanding societal discourse around disability and sexual autonomy.

In the very next year, the entire Indian movie fraternity witnessed a bold project on female sexual desires when director Leena Yadav came with *Parched* (2015). The sexual liberation and freedom of rights for women got stronger through this very movie. Yadav threw a challenge to the Indian patriarchal system through her movie and highlighted women's passions, fantasies and sexualities in a more prominent way. The movie no doubt changed the landscape of women's resistance against male dominance and also helped in sexual liberation and norms by wiping out the age old rules. Female nudity and revelation got much more accepted through this movie and hope for infinite women's desires took a leap of faith.

The coming of the age feminist drama *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) navigated the feminine desires and power dynamics in a way never seen before in Indian cinema through the vision of the director Alankrita Shrivastava. The movie did challenge all the common ground norms of patriarchal society and tried to establish a feminine school of free thoughts. One of the film's strengths is its unapologetic exploration of the repressed desires and aspirations of its

female protagonists. It courageously confronts taboo subjects such as sexuality, independence, and societal expectations, offering a rare glimpse into the private worlds of women who defy the conservative norms imposed upon them. This movie stands out for genuinely challenging the historical objectification of women's bodies in Bollywood cinema by subverting the male gaze and portraying women as active subjects rather than passive objects. The *burkha* in the film symbolizes an inversion of the male gaze, highlighting women looking out from under it and using temporary invisibility strategically to incertain socio-cultural contexts. While the protagonists grapple with the fight for equal rights, the film's core message revolves around their determination not to relinquish control over their bodies and associated pleasures. It serves as a feminist manifesto advocating for a politics of pleasure that goes beyond basic women's rights.

Lastly, the very recent, out of the box movie *The Mirror* (one of the anthologies of *Last Stories 2*, 2023) shattered the existing patriarchal desires and fantasies and enabled us to strike with female fantasies, from the female gaze to female desires and sexual liberations. Director Konkona Sen Sharma cleverly depicted her short cinematic canvas with lower and upper feminine juxtapositions in relation to dominance and subjugation as well as female desires and sexual cravings. The movie no doubt punched on the faces of traditional sexuality and established a feminine genre of sex and desires. In a staunchly patriarchal Indian society where women's sexuality, desires, and fantasies are tabooed and have not been addressed as deeply as male pleasure in Bollywood cinema, *The Mirror* emerges as a bold narrative that dismantles these societal constraints. Through its nuanced exploration of the female gaze, it

not only disrupts traditional perspectives but also opens a compelling dialogue about the right of women to embrace their own narratives of desire, pleasure and intimacy. In doing so, the film acts as a powerful catalyst for reshaping societal perceptions and advocating for the rightful expression of women's desires in a context where they have been historically suppressed.

The above discussions clearly indicate that these female centric movies by the female makers helped to build a new language of freedom and desires, breaking from all the shackles of patriarchal sexuality and systems by replacing them with dynamic power formations and fantasies through the female point of view. The evolution of Indian cinema through the lenses of female directors reflects a profound societal shift catalyzed by India's post-liberalization policies. In the 1990s, with the release of *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta, Indian cinema witnessed a watershed moment as Mehta fearlessly explored themes of female sexuality and desire, challenging age-old patriarchal norms. Over the years, this evolution has been marked by a series of groundbreaking films that continue to push the boundaries of storytelling and representation. These filmmakers have leveraged cinema as a tool for social commentary, challenging entrenched stereotypes and advocating for gender equality. From exploring the intersectionality of disability and sexuality to dismantling the male gaze and reclaiming female narratives of desire, each film has added a layer to the ongoing conversation about women's rights and representation in Indian society. The journey from *Fire* to *The Mirror* represents not only a cinematic evolution but also a broader societal transformation. As India's economy flourished and its cultural landscape diversified, so did the stories being told on screen. Female directors have played a pivotal role in this evolution, offering fresh perspectives and challenging the status quo.



Therefore, in contrast to Vagh's (2021) assertion that on-screen portrayals of sex and desire predominantly mirror male fantasies through the male gaze, irrespective of the filmmaker's gender, this paper takes a divergent stance. It argues that the filmmaker's gender significantly influences the portrayal of sex and female desire on screen, leading to distinct cinematic narratives and representations. While acknowledging the historical prevalence of male-centric perspectives in Bollywood cinema, this paper contends that recent trends indicate a departure from such norms, particularly evident in the works of female directors. By foregrounding female fantasies and perspectives, these filmmakers challenge and subvert the traditional male gaze, offering alternative narratives that prioritize female agency and empowerment. Therefore, while the influence of the male gaze cannot be entirely dismissed, it is crucial to recognize the evolving landscape of Bollywood cinema, where diverse voices and perspectives contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive portrayal of sex and desire on screen.

6. Conclusion

As has been argued in this paper, the representation of female desire and fantasy has undergone a transformative journey in Bollywood cinema. From early endeavors like *Fire* (1996) to more recent triumphs like *The Mirror* (2023), the female characters in these Bollywood cinemas have increasingly engaged in performative acts of resistance against prevailing masculine narratives and the male gaze. These films challenge societal norms, confront taboos, and present women as active agents in their pursuit of sexuality, desire and autonomy. The post-liberalization era in India witnessed significant economic and cultural transformations, yet cinema by male filmmakers remained entrenched in traditional gender roles and narratives. Despite attempts to address taboo subjects like homosexuality and sex work, films like *Girlfriend* and *Julie* failed to challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal and heteronormative structures. Instead, they sensationalized non-normative relationships and professions for shock value, catering primarily to the male gaze and reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Rather than leading the charge towards social change, male-directed Bollywood films often mirrored prevailing conservative attitudes, presenting a sanitized version of female empowerment that remained palatable to mainstream audiences.

Despite the comprehensive exploration presented in this study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First and foremost, the analysis primarily focuses on a select number of films, and the evolving landscape of Bollywood cinema could introduce newer perspectives that were not captured within the scope of this study. Additionally, the study predominantly centers on the heterosexual and cisgender experiences of female characters, leaving room for future research to delve into a more expansive examination of diverse identities within the realm of desire and fantasy. Furthermore, while the study provides insights into cinematic representations, it may benefit from incorporating audience reception studies or interviews to gauge the impact and interpretation of these representations on viewers. Ultimately, as Bollywood continues to explore the multifaceted nature of women's sexual desires and fantasies, these suggestions can help unravel the evolving narratives surrounding the historically marginalized representations of female desire, sexuality, and fantasy through “uncloseted lenses”.

Declaration

I, the submitting author (Shrinwanti Mistri), and on behalf of the co-author (Roudrajjal Dasgupta), accept and agree that the editorial decisions on submissions are final with no right to appeal.

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