

THE UNHEARD VOICE: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMAS

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Introduction:

THE UNHEARD VOICE :

Definition of “The Unheard Voice”

The Unheard Voice” refers to the silenced, ignored, or marginalized experiences, emotions, and perspectives of women that often remain unspoken or unrecognized in both real life (society) and reel life (cinema).

The Unheard Voice” symbolizes the need to recognize, represent, and amplify women’s true stories — both lived and portrayed — so that their voices are finally heard, respected, and understood.

The representation of women in Indian cinema has changed with time — from silence to strength. It reflects how society viewed women in different periods. Indian cinema has long been a powerful medium that reflects and shapes social values, cultural norms, and public perceptions. Over the decades, the portrayal of women in Indian films has undergone significant transformation. In early and middle phases of Indian cinema, female characters were often depicted in stereotypical roles such as the self-sacrificing mother, obedient wife, or romantic interest. These portrayals reinforced traditional gender roles and limited the representation of women’s individuality and agency. However, contemporary Indian cinema has gradually begun to explore more complex and realistic portrayals of women, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and quest for identity. Films such as Chandni Bar, Chameli, and Gangubai Kathiawadi present narratives centered on marginalized women who confront oppressive social structures and attempt to reclaim their voices. These films depict women not only as victims of societal injustice but also as individuals capable of resistance and transformation. The present article examines how these films portray the experiences of women who exist on the margins of society and how their stories challenge traditional cinematic stereotypes. By analyzing the representation of women in these films, the study aims to understand how Indian cinema gives space to voices that have historically been unheard. The present study aims to examine how these films represent women’s experiences and highlight the transformation of female characters from passive victims to agents of resistance and empowerment. By analyzing the narratives and characters of the selected films, the study seeks to understand how Indian cinema can function as a platform for expressing the unheard voices of women and addressing broader issues of gender inequality and social justice.

However, over time, Indian cinema has gradually begun to explore more diverse and realistic portrayals of women. Contemporary films increasingly highlight women’s struggles, resilience, and resistance against social oppression. These narratives focus on marginalized women who challenge traditional expectations and attempt to assert their identity and dignity within restrictive social structures. Films such as Chandni Bar, Chameli, and Gangubai Kathiawadi portray women who exist on the margins of society and confront issues such as poverty,

exploitation, and social stigma. Despite the difficulties they face, these female characters demonstrate courage and determination in their efforts to survive and reclaim their voices.

Literature Review:

Scholars in feminist film studies have extensively examined how cinema constructs gender identities and reinforces patriarchal ideology. Feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey argue that mainstream cinema often presents women as objects of visual pleasure for the male gaze, thereby limiting their agency within the narrative. Similarly, E. Ann Kaplan highlights how cinematic narratives frequently position women as passive figures whose identities are shaped by male-centered perspectives. Several studies have also explored the stereotypical representation of women in Indian cinema, noting that female characters have historically been confined to roles that emphasize beauty, sacrifice, and emotional dependence. However, recent research suggests that contemporary films increasingly challenge these traditional portrayals by presenting women as independent and assertive individuals. Studies focusing on films like *Chandni Bar* reveal how cinema can portray the harsh realities faced by marginalized women, including exploitation, poverty, and social stigma. Similarly, analyses of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* highlight themes of resistance, empowerment, and leadership. Despite these contributions, there remains a need for further research that examines how different films collectively represent the voices and experiences of marginalized women in Indian society.

1::Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022): The Empowering Resistance to Injustice

This paper argues that the film's representation of Gangubai Kathiawadi serves as a symbolic 'empowering resistance' to injustice in forced prostitution in Asia, analyzed through feminist perspectives.

2: Man-Woman Relationship in Madhur Bhandarkar's Film 'Chandani Bar'

This analysis focuses on the complex man-woman relationship in 'Chandani Bar,' highlighting the film's portrayal of the challenges faced by women in oppressive societal structures.

3.Evolution of Women in Indian Cinema :

This research explores the portrayal of women in Indian cinema, analyzing how their representation has evolved over time and the impact of these portrayals on societal norms.

4:Reel Women, Real Stereotypes:

This paper examines the stereotypical portrayal of women in Indian cinema, discussing how films create and reinforce gender roles over time.

5:Feminist Stylistics Analysis of the Movie 'Gangubai Kathiawadi':

This study analyzes the film 'Gangubai Kathiawadi' through feminist stylistics, focusing on how the film portrays injustice and inequality faced by women during that era.

6:Representation of Women in Realistic Cinema :

This study examines how women are presented and misrepresented in realistic cinema, based on feminist film theory and analysis of realistic films.

7:Stereotyping Women in Indian Cinema:

This paper deals with representations of women characters in mainstream Bollywood movies, discussing how their portrayal on screen is crucial in determining the stereotypes that exist in society.

8:Bollywood as a Site of Resistance: Women and Agency in Cinema:

This paper explores traditional portrayals of women in Bollywood and critiques these films to look at how resistance is portrayed, focusing on women's agency in cinema.

9:Women Empowerment Depicted in 'Gangubai Kathiawadi':

This study investigates women's empowerment found in the film 'Gangubai Kathiawadi,' focusing on female sex workers who are often marginalized by society.

10:Women of Cinema: Indian and Western Femininity on Screen:

This paper discusses the representation of femininity in Indian and Western cinema, examining how women are portrayed and the influence of these portrayals on societal perceptions.

11:The Influence of Female Characters in Cinema:

This research investigates the multifaceted relationship between the portrayal of female characters in cinema and its impact on societal norms and individual perceptions.

12:Changing Roles of Women in Indian Cinema:

This article deals with the fast-changing roles of women portrayed in Indian cinema, focusing on contemporary films that depict women as more independent, confident, and career-oriented.

13:Representation of Sexual Violence Against Women in 'Gangubai Kathiawadi':

This study aims to analyze the representation of sexual violence in the film 'Gangubai Kathiawadi,' exploring how the film addresses this social issue.

Objectives and Aim

- 1.To Analyze the representation of women in mainstream Indian Cinema.
2. To Identify recurring gender stereotypes and tropes in female characters.
3. To Evaluate how women's role have evolved in Indian Cinema over time.
4. To Examine the extent to which Indian Cinema reflects or Challenges societal gender norms.

5. To explore the visibility and agency of female characters in different genres of Indian Films.

Aim:

The aim of this study is to understand how Indian cinema portrays women who challenge social oppression and attempt to reclaim their identity and dignity. The aim of this study is to examine the representation of women in Indian cinema and to analyze how female characters express their voices, struggles, and identities within patriarchal social structures. The study focuses on selected films such as *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, *Chameli*, and *Chandni Bar* to understand how cinema portrays marginalized women and their experiences. It aims to explore the transformation of female characters from passive victims to individuals who demonstrate resistance, agency, and empowerment. Furthermore, the study seeks to understand how these cinematic narratives reflect social realities and contribute to broader discussions on gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary Indian society.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research approach that focuses on textual and thematic analysis of selected films. The research examines narrative structure, character development, and cinematic techniques to understand how women's experiences are portrayed. The films selected for analysis include *Chandni Bar*, *Chameli*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. These films were chosen because they depict women who belong to marginalized sections of society and highlight issues such as exploitation, survival, and resistance. The analysis is guided by feminist film theory, which helps interpret how gender, power, and social structures influence cinematic representation.

Research Design:

The present study will adopt a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how women are represented in Indian cinema across different decades.

Qualitative content analysis enables an in-depth understanding of films as cultural texts — focusing on dialogues, characterization, narrative techniques, and visual representation to identify patterns of gender portrayal.

Nature of the Study:

This is a descriptive and analytical study. It does not rely on numerical data but interprets how cinematic elements construct meaning about women's identity, agency, and social position.

Film Selection Criteria:

To ensure variety and representativeness, the researcher will analyze 10–20 Indian films from the decades 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020.

Hit films that achieved popularity or critical acclaim.

Films with prominent female characters who play a central role in the narrative.

Films directed by both male and female directors, to compare gender perspectives in direction.

A mix of genres, such as romance, drama, social issue-based, and biographical films.

Regional representation, including Hindi cinema (Bollywood) as well as selected regional films (Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, etc.) if relevant.

Data Collection:

Primary Data: The films themselves will serve as the primary data. Each film will be viewed carefully, and scenes involving key female characters will be analyzed for dialogue, costume, framing, camera angle, and narrative control.

Secondary Data: Books, journal articles, and film reviews will provide theoretical and contextual support. Works such as *Feminist Film Theory* by Laura Mulvey and *Cinema of Interruptions* by Lalitha Gopalan will serve as key references.

Analysis:

The selected films present a powerful portrayal of women who struggle to survive within oppressive social environments. In *Chandni Bar*, the character of Mumtaz is forced into the world of bar dancing due to poverty and social circumstances. The film realistically depicts the exploitation and hardships faced by women in such environments, emphasizing the lack of social support and the persistence of patriarchal control. Similarly, *Chameli* portrays the life of a sex worker who openly shares her experiences and challenges societal judgments. Through her character, the film presents a humanized perspective of women often marginalized by society. In *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, the protagonist emerges as a powerful figure who challenges injustice and advocates for the rights of women in the red-light district. These films collectively highlight the resilience and determination of women who refuse to remain silent despite facing systemic oppression.

Findings or Results:

The analysis of the selected films reveals that Indian cinema has gradually begun to portray women as active participants in their own narratives rather than passive victims. The characters depicted in these films demonstrate resilience, courage, and the ability to challenge social injustice. The films also highlight the intersection of gender, class, and social stigma in shaping women's experiences.

Discussion :

The findings of this study align with feminist theories that critique patriarchal structures within cinema. While traditional films often objectified women, the selected films demonstrate a shift toward more realistic and empowering representations. These narratives provide a platform for marginalized women to express their struggles and aspirations, thereby challenging societal stereotypes. The findings of this study reveal that the representation of women in Indian cinema has gradually evolved from passive and stereotypical portrayals to more complex and empowered characters. Traditionally, female characters in mainstream films were often confined to roles such as the obedient wife, devoted mother, or romantic interest. These representations reinforced patriarchal ideologies and limited women's agency within cinematic narratives. Feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey have argued that cinema often constructs women as objects of visual pleasure for the male gaze, while scholars like E. Ann Kaplan emphasize that women's roles in films are frequently shaped by male-dominated narrative structures. However, the films examined in this study demonstrate a noticeable shift in the portrayal of women, particularly those belonging to marginalized social groups.

The analysis of *Chandni Bar*, *Chameli*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* illustrates how cinema can bring attention to the struggles and resilience of women who live in socially stigmatized environments. These films depict female characters who confront poverty, exploitation, and social discrimination, yet they also highlight their

determination to survive and assert their dignity. Instead of presenting women merely as victims, the narratives emphasize their strength, adaptability, and ability to challenge oppressive structures.

Furthermore, the films contribute to a broader discourse on gender equality by portraying women as individuals capable of leadership, resistance, and self-expression. The characters in these films provide visibility to voices that have historically been marginalized in both society and cinema. By presenting more realistic and empathetic portrayals of women, these films challenge conventional stereotypes and encourage audiences to reconsider societal attitudes toward gender roles. Thus, Indian cinema has the potential to function not only as a reflection of social realities but also as a platform for promoting awareness, empathy, and progressive change regarding the representation of women.

Conclusion :

The representation of women in Indian cinema has evolved significantly over time. Films such as *Chandni Bar*, *Chameli*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* highlight the voices and experiences of women who have historically been marginalized. By presenting stories of resistance and resilience, these films contribute to a broader understanding of gender inequality and social justice. The study concludes that cinema can serve as a powerful platform for amplifying the unheard voices of women and promoting greater awareness about their struggles and aspirations. This study examined the representation of women in Indian cinema through the selected films *Chandni Bar*, *Chameli*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. The analysis demonstrates that the portrayal of women in Indian films has gradually shifted from traditional and stereotypical roles to more complex and powerful representations. Earlier cinematic narratives often depicted women as passive characters confined to domestic spaces or dependent on male figures. However, contemporary films increasingly present women as individuals who possess agency, resilience, and the ability to challenge oppressive social structures.

The selected films highlight the lives of women who exist on the margins of society and are frequently silenced by social stigma and economic hardship. Despite these challenges, the female protagonists in these narratives assert their identity and dignity while confronting injustice and exploitation. Their stories reveal the intersection of gender, class, and social inequality, emphasizing the difficulties faced by women in marginalized professions and environments. At the same time, these characters embody strength and resistance, demonstrating that women are not merely victims but active participants in shaping their own destinies.

Furthermore, the study confirms that cinema can function as a powerful medium for social reflection and transformation. By portraying the struggles and resilience of marginalized women, these films contribute to a broader discourse on gender equality and women's empowerment. They challenge conventional stereotypes and encourage audiences to reconsider societal attitudes toward women's roles and capabilities. Therefore, the representation of women in Indian cinema continues to evolve, offering greater visibility to voices that were once ignored or suppressed. Through such narratives, cinema becomes a platform for amplifying the unheard voices of women and promoting a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of their experiences.

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