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Depiction of Feminism in Bollywood's Silver Screen: A Study

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Abstract

This study examines how feminism is represented in four contemporary Hindi screen texts: *Mardaani* (2014), *Dangal* (2016), *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), and *Taali* (2023). Bollywood and related Hindi-language screen media have substantial cultural influence because they both reflect and shape public attitudes toward gender. Using a qualitative comparative case-study design, the analysis combines textual, content, and film analysis. The texts were purposively selected because they centre women's or transgender experience across distinct genres and social settings, including policing, sport, domestic life and paid work, and rights-based activism. The study draws on Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Crenshaw's intersectional approach. The findings show that all four texts expand female or transgender visibility and agency, yet their feminist meanings remain negotiated rather than complete. *Mardaani* locates empowerment within state authority and violence; *Dangal* challenges gendered sporting norms while retaining paternal control; *Tumhari Sulu* affirms women's economic and personal aspirations but continues to place domestic responsibility on the woman; and *Taali* broadens feminist discourse through transgender identity and activism while relying on an exceptional biographical figure. Taken together, the texts reveal a gradual movement from symbolic empowerment toward more inclusive representation, although patriarchal institutions continue to shape the terms on which agency becomes visible.

Keywords: Bollywood, feminist film theory, gender performativity, intersectionality, representation.

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the historical context, major screen texts, and notable filmmakers that have shaped feminist representation in Indian cinema, while also considering its wider social

significance. Indian cinema, and Bollywood in particular, offers an influential medium for communicating social and economic concerns while reflecting prevailing cultural values. The portrayal of women has changed substantially over time as India's social fabric has changed. Women were often confined to domestic, sacrificial, romantic, or decorative roles in earlier mainstream narratives; more recent works have made greater space for women's labour, ambition, sexuality, professional authority, and resistance.

These changes do not mean that patriarchal representation has disappeared. Popular cinema can challenge gender stereotypes while still depending on familiar institutions, heroic formulas, family approval, and commercial expectations. Feminist progress on screen must therefore be assessed not only by asking whether a woman occupies the central role, but also by examining who controls the narrative, how her body and voice are framed, what social conditions shape her choices, and whether her empowerment changes the surrounding power structure.

The four selected films provide distinct points of entry into these questions. Pradeep Sarkar's *Mardaani* places a woman within a male-dominated police institution; Nitesh Tiwari's *Dangal* examines girls entering competitive wrestling under their father's authority; Suresh Triveni's *Tumhari Sulu* connects female self-realisation with paid work and domestic negotiation; and Ravi Jadhav's streaming series *Taali* centres the life and activism of a transgender woman. Together, they show how feminist discourse travels across crime, sport, domestic comedy-drama, and biographical storytelling.

The central argument of this article is that contemporary Hindi screen culture presents feminism as a negotiated form of agency: the protagonists challenge restrictive gender roles, yet their freedom remains conditioned by state power, paternal authority, domestic labour, class, gender identity, and the demands of popular storytelling. By comparing these tensions rather than treating each protagonist only as a model of empowerment, the study contributes a theoretically grounded account of how Bollywood and related Hindi screen media can simultaneously contest and reproduce patriarchal norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gandhi and Srinivasan (2025), in "Bollywood's Feminist Revolution: A Study of the Emerging Trends and Themes in the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema," examine changing representations of women in contemporary Bollywood through *Saand Ki Aankh*, *Queen*, *Mimi*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. They identify a clear shift from conventional portrayals toward women who appear autonomous, confident, self-reliant, motivated, and professionally ambitious. Their study is important because it connects women-centred storytelling with a broader transformation in public gender discourse.

Kaur (2022), in "Feminism in Mainstream Hindi Cinema: Content Analysis of *Parched* & *Lipstick Under My Burkha*," studies feminist representations through the concept of the male gaze and content analysis. The study finds that these films resist patriarchal stereotypes by presenting women who are assertive, self-aware, and unwilling to accept social control over their sexuality, lifestyle, and economic choices. Kaur's analysis shows how women-centred films can operate as counter-narratives within mainstream culture.

Prasad and Tiwari (2023), in "Feminism in Hindi Cinema: A Critical Analysis," trace the development of feminist representation in Bollywood. Drawing on ideas such as the male gaze and gender performativity, they argue that mainstream cinema has historically reproduced patriarchal ideology through stereotypical and subordinate female roles. At the same time, women-centred and subversive films increasingly foreground female agency, sexuality, and resistance. Their conclusion is cautious: representation is becoming more nuanced, but the movement toward equality remains uneven.

Gajjar (2022) similarly notes that earlier Hindi films largely reinforced patriarchal stereotypes, whereas many recent films depict women as more independent and expressive. **Sharma (2014)** emphasizes the persistence of roles such as the submissive wife, sacrificing mother, romantic interest, and glamorised object, even when stronger female characters appear. Read together, these studies indicate that visibility alone is not a sufficient measure of feminist progress; the ideological function of the role must also be considered.

Sharma (2024) examines the feminist consciousness of Queen through Rani Mehra's movement from dependence toward self-reliance after her fiancé abandons her. The analysis presents personal growth, confidence, and self-discovery as alternatives to marital validation. **Gogoi and Deb (2022)**, however, identify a dual pattern in selected Bollywood films: progressive, career-oriented female protagonists coexist with narratives that continue to reinforce male dominance and traditional expectations. This tension between change and continuity is central to the present study.

Shah and Cory (2019) complicate a purely celebratory or purely condemnatory reading of popular cinema. Their psychoanalytic-feminist study of item songs argues that such sequences may reproduce objectification while also creating limited spaces in which female performers claim visibility, sexual expression, and a self-fashioned public identity. **Agarwal and Kumar (2024)** approach representation from the audience side and report a positive relationship between progressive portrayals of women and young viewers' support for gender equality. Together, these studies show that cinematic meaning is produced through contradiction and can influence social attitudes without becoming uniformly feminist.

Ojha (2016), in an MPhil dissertation on women in Hindi adaptations of Shakespearean tragedies, shows how women's agency and moral complexity are reshaped by Indian cultural expectations and cinematic conventions. The adaptations may preserve elements of the source characters while adjusting them to local gender norms. This observation is useful for the present research because it demonstrates that representation emerges from a negotiation between narrative form, cultural location, and audience expectation.

The literature therefore establishes two broad positions. One group of studies documents the movement from stereotypical roles toward female autonomy; another warns that seemingly progressive narratives can retain the gaze, authority structures, and commercial conventions of patriarchy. What remains less developed is a comparative account of how different genres and social institutions shape the terms of empowerment. The present study addresses that gap by applying a common theoretical framework to four texts and by comparing the enabling and limiting conditions attached to each protagonist's agency.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis combines three complementary feminist concepts. First, **Mulvey's (1975)** theory of the male gaze explains how mainstream cinema has frequently organised visual pleasure around a masculine viewing position, turning women into spectacles while reserving narrative action for men. In the present study, this concept is used more broadly to ask whether the protagonist is treated as an object to be viewed or as a subject who acts, speaks, decides, and directs the narrative.

Second, **Butler's (1990)** concept of gender performativity treats gender not as a fixed natural essence but as an identity repeatedly produced through socially regulated acts, gestures, language, dress, and bodily conduct. This lens is particularly relevant to *Dangal*, where repeated physical training unsettles the belief that wrestling is naturally masculine, and to *Taali*, where *Gauri's* self-identification and public activism challenge the compulsory male-female binary.

Third, **Crenshaw's (1989)** intersectional approach draws attention to the way gender interacts with other structures of advantage and exclusion. The selected protagonists do not experience gender

in identical ways: their opportunities are shaped by professional authority, rural or urban location, class, family status, and gender identity. Intersectionality prevents the analysis from treating “woman” as a single, universal category and makes Taali’s transgender politics central rather than supplementary to feminist discussion.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To study the development of feminism and its effects on Bollywood Hindi cinema.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative comparative case-study design that combines textual analysis, qualitative content analysis, and film analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select from the three movies and one Biography: Mardaani (2014), Dangal (2016), Tumhari Sulu (2017), and Taali (2023). These works were chosen because each places a woman or transgender protagonist at the narrative centre and connects gender with a different institutional or social setting: law enforcement and trafficking, sport and family discipline, domestic life and paid employment, and transgender rights activism. They also represent different popular genres and span nine years of contemporary Hindi screen culture. Taali is a streaming series rather than a theatrical film; it is included deliberately because it demonstrates the extension of feminist discourse from Bollywood cinema into Hindi-language digital screen media.

The analytical procedure involved close viewing and scene-based note-taking followed by thematic coding. Scenes were examined for (a) narrative agency and decision-making; (b) visual or verbal objectification; (c) the performance of gender through body, dress, speech, labour, and conduct; (d) the role of family, state, workplace, and other institutions; (e) intersections of gender with class, location, occupation, and gender identity; and (f) the resolution offered by the narrative. Each text was first analysed as an individual case. A cross-case comparison was then used to identify recurring patterns, differences, and ideological contradictions.

The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical. It does not claim that four films represent the whole of Bollywood, nor does it measure audience reception. Its purpose is to provide a theoretically informed reading of how selected popular narratives construct empowerment. No human participants or personal data were involved.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF BOLLYWOOD AND HINDI SCREEN FILMS

1. “MARDAANI” (2014); Director: Pradeep Sarkar; Lead Actress: Rani Mukerji

Mardaani follows Shivani Shivaji Roy, an officer in the Mumbai Crime Branch. When a teenage girl close to her is abducted, Shivani uncovers a human-trafficking network that targets vulnerable girls. Rather than being intimidated by powerful criminals, she directs the investigation and pursues the traffickers through intelligence, courage, and determination. The film combines the conventions of an action thriller with a social message about the protection of girls from exploitation.

Shivani is presented as a humane police officer whose authority comes from duty rather than personal dominance. She combines professional competence with emotional intelligence and shows that courage includes the willingness to confront injustice under pressure. In a male-dominated system, she leads confidently, makes autonomous decisions, and refuses to be manipulated by criminals. Her empathy for exploited girls adds care to her model of strength, so empowerment is associated with dignity, rights, leadership, and social responsibility rather than aggression alone.

From the perspective of the male gaze, Mardaani is significant because Shivani is primarily the subject of action rather than an erotic object. The camera and plot emphasise her investigation, judgement, and command. Her competence does not depend on a romantic relationship, and her

professional identity remains central. In this respect, the film challenges the conventional division in which men advance the plot while women serve as visual or emotional support.

The empowerment narrative nevertheless contains an important contradiction. Shivani's agency is made possible by her position within the police, and justice is ultimately pursued through surveillance, coercion, and physical violence. The film can therefore be read as feminist at the level of gendered professional authority while remaining largely uncritical of state power. The trafficked girls are treated compassionately, but they possess limited narrative agency and depend on rescue by an exceptional officer. Mardaani thus disrupts masculine assumptions about leadership, yet it individualises a structural problem by placing the solution in the hands of one heroic state representative.

2. "DANGAL" (2016); Director: Nitesh Tiwari; Lead Actress: Fatima Sana Shaikh

Geeta Phogat, the female lead in Dangal, is portrayed as a developing and resilient young woman whose journey symbolises both personal and social change. At the beginning of the film, she has little awareness of her athletic ability or future possibilities. Like many girls in a patriarchal rural setting, she is expected to follow a life organised around domestic responsibility and early marriage. Her initial lack of ambition is therefore connected to restricted social expectations rather than an absence of ability.

Geeta strongly resists when her father, Mahavir Singh Phogat, introduces her to wrestling. She experiences the discipline, physical training, and emotional pressure as an imposition. Gradually, however, her encounter with the limited and dependent futures available to many girls becomes a psychological turning point. External pressure is transformed into internal motivation, and she begins to accept wrestling as a path toward self-confidence and achievement.

From an educational-psychological perspective, Geeta's development moves from externally directed training toward self-driven learning. She acquires self-control, confidence, and goal-oriented behaviour, which support her progress to national competition. Her move to the sports academy brings another stage of identity formation. Exposure to new methods increases her independence, but it also produces conflict with her father. Her later setbacks and renewed engagement with his advice are presented as signs of reflection, emotional maturity, and cognitive reorganisation. During the championship, her skill, resilience, and mental control complete the transformation from a hesitant village girl into an internationally successful athlete.

Butler's concept of gender performativity clarifies the feminist force of this transformation. Through repeated training, competition, dress, and public performance, Geeta and her sister expose the idea that strength and wrestling are naturally masculine. Their bodies acquire meanings that the village initially refuses to recognise. The sporting arena therefore becomes a space in which gender norms are not merely criticised in dialogue but materially reworked through disciplined action.

At the same time, Dangal does not fully escape patriarchal authority. Mahavir identifies his daughters' talent, chooses their career, regulates their bodies and routines, and remains the narrative's principal source of knowledge. Geeta's rebellion at the academy is framed partly as error, while her success depends on reconciliation with the father's guidance. The film challenges the belief that daughters are less capable than sons, but it often makes female emancipation possible through benevolent paternal control. Geeta's final performance gives her genuine agency, yet the narrative continues to link that agency to the father's dream. The film is therefore both transformative and conservative: it dismantles one gender barrier while retaining the father as the organising authority.

3. "TUMHARI SULU" (2017); Director: Suresh Triveni; Lead Actress: Vidya Balan

Tumhari Sulu is a Hindi comedy-drama about Sulochana "Sulu" Dubey, a lively middle-class homemaker in Mumbai who pursues an unexpected professional opportunity. The ordinary domestic setting is central to the film's realism. Sulu has less formal education than her sisters and sometimes

faces their condescension, but she retains confidence, curiosity, and a desire to participate in the world beyond household routine. Her experience reflects how many homemakers set aside personal ambitions while carrying family responsibilities.

Sulu frequently enters small competitions and radio contests, and these successes strengthen her confidence. When she applies to become a radio jockey, the station manager recognises her distinctive voice and natural warmth despite her lack of professional experience. Sulu is selected to host the late-night programme "Tumhari Sulu," and her humorous, intimate manner quickly attracts listeners. Paid work gives her public recognition and a stronger sense of self.

Her employment also unsettles the household. The late-night schedule creates tension, her son's schoolwork deteriorates, and her husband Ashok faces insecurity in his own workplace. The film therefore explores the conflict between career, ambition, and domestic responsibility without turning the family into a simple enemy. It affirms that homemakers possess talent and can succeed when opportunity, commitment, and support come together. Vidya Balan's performance makes Sulu's aspirations emotionally credible and presents empowerment through ordinary persistence rather than exceptional heroism.

The film's feminist value lies in treating a middle-class homemaker's voice, humour, and work as worthy of public attention. The male gaze operates less through visual display than through the commercial use of Sulu's sensual radio voice. She gains agency through that voice, but the workplace also packages it for a presumed male audience. This double movement makes the film more complex than a simple success story: visibility can produce independence while also placing femininity within a marketable format.

Family problems are quickly connected to Sulu's employment, which reproduces the assumption that a mother remains primarily responsible for domestic stability even when she begins paid work. Ashok's vulnerability is portrayed sympathetically, yet Sulu bears the greater pressure to reconcile home and career. The narrative challenges the confinement of women to the household, but it does not fully redistribute domestic labour. Its feminism is therefore negotiated through family accommodation rather than separation from family life.

4. "TAALI" (2023); Director: Ravi Jadhav; Lead Actress: Sushmita Sen

Taali is a biographical Hindi-language streaming series based on the life of transgender activist Shreegauri Sawant. It foregrounds the discrimination, struggle, and public activism experienced by India's transgender community. The narrative follows Gauri, who is assigned male at birth and faces rejection from family and society because of her gender identity. Despite humiliation, exclusion, and material hardship, she fights for recognition, dignity, and equal rights. Her legal and social activism connects personal self-acceptance with collective political change.

The title refers to the distinctive clap associated with hijra and transgender communities. Within the series, the gesture is reworked from a mark used by society to stigmatise difference into an assertion of identity and pride. Sushmita Sen's performance communicates Gauri's emotional depth, resilience, and public authority, while Ravi Jadhav's direction makes complex questions of identity, discrimination, law, and activism accessible to a broad audience.

Butler's concept of gender performativity is especially relevant here because Gauri's identity contests the assumption that assigned sex determines a fixed social role. Speech, dress, bodily gesture, naming, and public activism become practices through which she asserts an identity that society repeatedly attempts to deny. Crenshaw's intersectional perspective further shows that the discrimination she encounters cannot be understood through gender alone. Gender identity interacts with family rejection, economic insecurity, social stigma, and unequal access to legal recognition.

Taali expands the scope of feminist screen discourse beyond the experience of cisgender women and gives educational value to questions of inclusion, empathy, diversity, and rights. Its streaming format also shows how feminist narratives now circulate beyond theatrical Bollywood. The series can support discussion of gender sensitivity because it links dignity to institutional recognition as well as individual courage.

The representation still deserves critical attention. Casting a prominent cisgender star can increase visibility, but it may also keep transgender performers outside the central role. The biographical form compresses a diverse community's struggle into the achievements of an exceptional individual, and scenes of suffering can risk making transgender pain the main route to audience sympathy. Even so, Taali shifts the debate from symbolic female strength to a more intersectional politics of identity, law, community, and collective rights.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

Across the four texts, feminist agency moves through different social institutions. Shivani acts through the police and state law; Geeta gains public authority through competitive sport; Sulu enters paid media work while negotiating family life; and Gauri turns personal identity into collective activism. This range shows that contemporary Hindi screen culture no longer restricts women to a single domestic or romantic function. The protagonists make decisions, work, speak publicly, and alter the direction of their narratives.

The texts differ, however, in how far they transform the structures around the protagonist. Mardaani places a woman in command but relies on a coercive police framework. Dangal opens a masculine sport to girls but keeps paternal knowledge at the centre. Tumhari Sulu legitimises women's paid work but continues to hold the woman responsible for family equilibrium. Taali offers the broadest challenge to binary gender and moves toward collective rights, yet it also depends on celebrity embodiment and exceptional biography. In each case, empowerment is real but conditional.

The comparison also reveals a change in the form of visibility. Mardaani and Dangal establish competence in domains culturally coded as masculine; Tumhari Sulu values voice, everyday aspiration, and middle-class labour; Taali reframes feminism through transgender identity and legal recognition. This is not a simple linear history, and the small purposive sample cannot represent all Hindi cinema. Nevertheless, the movement from professional inclusion to domestic self-definition and intersectional activism suggests an expanding feminist vocabulary across contemporary screen culture.

The theoretical lenses clarify why a celebratory reading is insufficient. The male gaze asks whether the central figure is allowed to act rather than merely appear; performativity shows how repeated bodily and social practices can unsettle supposedly natural gender roles; and intersectionality explains why gendered agency differs across class, occupation, location, and gender identity. Together, these perspectives reveal that a women-centred or transgender-centred narrative is not automatically feminist. Its politics depend on the distribution of authority, the representation of bodies and labour, and the kind of resolution it offers.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the development and effects of feminist representation in four contemporary Hindi screen texts and to compare how they challenge or reproduce patriarchal power. The analysis finds that Mardaani, Dangal, Tumhari Sulu, and Taali all widen the space available to women and transgender protagonists. They present professional authority, athletic excellence, economic aspiration, self-identification, and activism as legitimate forms of agency. In this respect, they contribute to the ongoing transformation of gender representation in popular Indian screen culture.

Their feminist meanings are nevertheless uneven. Mardaani's model of empowerment depends on state authority and violent justice; Dangal's challenge to gendered sport remains organised by

paternal control; Tumhari Sulu's celebration of work leaves the unequal burden of domestic care largely intact; and Taali's inclusive politics is mediated through celebrity casting and exceptional biography. These contradictions do not erase the progressive value of the texts. Instead, they show that popular feminist narratives often work from within existing institutions rather than completely transforming them.

The comparative findings support the article's central argument: contemporary Bollywood and related Hindi screen media depict feminism as negotiated agency. Progress appears when protagonists claim voice, movement, work, authority, and identity, but the terms of recognition remain shaped by family, state, market, and social hierarchies. A critical reading must therefore move beyond asking whether a text contains a "strong woman" and examine whose power enables her, what costs accompany her success, and whether other marginalised people also gain agency. This approach places the selected works within the broader scholarly conversation on the possibilities and limits of feminist representation in Indian popular culture.

Because the sample is small and purposive, the findings should be understood as interpretive rather than representative of the entire industry. Future research may extend the same comparative framework to a larger sample, include audience responses, or compare theatrical and streaming narratives. Within its stated scope, however, the study demonstrates that the most valuable feminist screen texts are not those that merely praise individual strength, but those that make visible the institutional and intersectional conditions under which strength becomes possible.

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