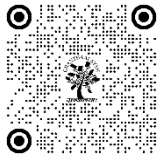


# EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DECADES THROUGH 10 ICONIC FILMS

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## ABSTRACT

Indian cinema has long been a mirror reflecting societal norms and cultural shifts, with the portrayal of women evolving significantly over the years. This research explores the changing roles of women in Indian cinema over five decades, delving into the nuanced portrayals through a comparative analysis of ten influential films. Selected films, two from each decade (80s, 90s, 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s), serve as windows into the evolving dynamics of female characters and their representation. Through a critical examination of these cinematic masterpieces, this study aims to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of female characters, investigating how their roles, agency, and representations have metamorphosed over time. By examining how women are depicted in various contexts, the research sheds light on the evolving narratives and societal perceptions captured by Indian filmmakers, contributing to a deeper understanding of the shifting cultural landscape through the lens of cinema.

**Keywords:** Changing Roles of Women, Indian Cinema, Qualitative Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Societal Contextualization, Secondary Literature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indian Cinema, which has celebrated its illustrious 75-year journey, stands as a cultural behemoth, a testament to the diversity, richness, and narrative complexity that characterizes Bollywood. The major branch of cinema is the Hindi film industry, which is located in Mumbai (previously Bombay). Similar to Hollywood, the Hindi film industry is sometimes referred to as "Bollywood." Sometimes, especially outside of South Asia, the term "Bollywood" is used to refer to Indian film in its whole, yet this usage is inaccurate. Bollywood (Hindi) films are distinctly different from other Indian regional films. Bollywood only makes up around 20% of India's overall film output, which is the largest in the world and precedes Bollywood. Bollywood does not represent all of Indian cinema (Ganti, 2004). These days, most Bollywood films are heavily inspired by western society, as the plots and topics reflect the local culture. It is thought that practically all

Indians watch Bollywood, despite the fact that it may have the greatest viewership. According to Enrik Parker (2009), the Indian film industry is the biggest and most well-liked globally. Each year, more over a thousand films are released, the most of which are made in Hindi. It is the Hindi-language sector, which is amiably referred to as "Bollywood."

Dasgupta (1996), who considered Hindi cinema as a very popular kind of art and literature, provides the best argument for studying them. They have the highest reach on the list. Additionally, Bollywood has been a significant Indian cultural reference point (Bagchi, 1996). It has captured the shifting landscape of contemporary India to a degree that no other creative genre has ever managed.

It is true that many academics have examined how women are portrayed in Bollywood films. However, previous research has mostly concentrated on how lead female characters are portrayed, how women are stereotyped, and how women are constructed as either good or bad (Gopalan, 1997; Ganti, 2004; Kishwar & Vanita, 1987).

Cinema is an idea that has the power to deeply influence through its platform. Ideas can be skillfully endorsed and manipulated in the public conscience. Why can't it be used as an instrument of positive change? Rome was not built in a day, but we can pave the way to a better-balanced society by emphasizing the humanistic and real position of women. There should be some eye-opening and constructive enterprise in making gender-neutral assumptions and a just way of impartial depictions. Wrong portrayals lead to violence against women, body shaming, one-dimensional characterizations, and a general disrespect for women in their multiplicity of roles. A powerful platform used rightly can be the change that is desperately needed (Anupama George & Dr. Jeyanthi B, 2023). The myth of an eternal, monolithic, and homogenous national tradition—which serves as the general backdrop for most mainstream Indian cinema—was also dismantled with the help of the foregrounding of a changing Indian society (Sanghita Sen, 2017).

While there is a body of feminist Hindi filmmaking, the leading lady of Hindi cinema has largely portrayed characters that are in line with Indian society's beliefs. Bollywood women have traditionally been portrayed as one-dimensional, white-or black-colored, virtuous or evil. There aren't any gray areas. Popular movies that made a distinction between the wife and the other woman, or the heroine and the vamp, furthered this duality. A lot of the inspiration for movies has also come from religion and mythology, where female characters were viewed as the pinnacle of morality and virtue—those who were incapable of doing anything wrong. After independence, the idea of women like "Sita" has been brought up numerous times in movies (Nidhi Shendurnikar Tere, 2012).

In addition to choreographers, visual designers, directors, and scriptwriters, women are now employed in Bollywood as lighting assistants, stuntwomen, gaffers, and editors—roles that were previously only held by men. Breaking away from the nepotistic system of the "old boys' club" that is Bollywood, the female professionals, who were once a tiny minority in the industry, are now training and mentoring a new generation of female professionals in all sorts of jobs (Sanghita Sen, 2017).

Bollywood's leading ladies have typically been simple, happy to live happily ever after in the institution of marriage, despite their education and desire to forge their own identities.

Shahla Raza (2003) discusses how women appeared in a variety of jobs in Hindi cinema during the 1970s: Jaya Bachchan as a singer in "Abhimaan" and a village tonga driver in "Sholay," Hema Malini as a general manager of a company in "Trishul," Rakhee as a corporate secretary in "Trishul" and a doctor in "Kala Pathar," and Vidya Sinha as an employee of a private company in "Chhoti Si Baat." (Nidhi Shendurnikar Tere, 2012).

Initially cast as mere decorative elements, and at times confined to roles as victims or martyrs, women in Hindi cinema have undergone a remarkable transformation. The Hindi film actress has transcended the traditional portrayal of the 'abala naari,' emerging as a figure of substance and strength. Presently, she not only stands up for her rights but also vocalizes against injustice, fiercely fights for her honor and dignity, and when the situation calls for it, she rebels without apology.

Over the decades, Hindi films have adeptly portrayed the evolving dynamics of time and culture, capturing significant shifts in women's professions and their resilient stance against household abuses. From iconic figures like Meena Kumari to contemporary powerhouses like Vidya Balan, and from the classic portrayal in "Mother India" to the bold narratives in "Lipstick Under My Burkha," the female actors in Hindi cinema have been instrumental in expressing the deep changes that the country has undergone.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Datta [1], in her scholarly exploration, explores the idea of cultural identity and individualized nationality, focusing on the consequences for gender via media and cinema. Her research indicates that the introduction of satellite television in the 1980s brought about a profound change in the global perspective. During this period, narrative cinema witnessed an inundation of portrayals where women were depicted under the dominating influence of masculine ideals, characterized by a muscular physique and physical aggression. These representations propagated conservative ideologies that valorized males while objectifying females. As the 20th century drew to a close, the era of globalization seemingly championed the interests of the free market, employing the family paradigm with the nation as a metaphor. Women were restricted to household and maternal roles by this paradigm, which placed them in inferior positions. Datta contends, however, that the fight for equality and the women's movement have had a transforming effect, elevating women from the fringes to the forefront of conversation and highlighting the subjectivity of women. She draws attention to directors that portrayed strong female leads and offered complex insights into their social and sexual identities, including Aparna Sen, Vijaya Mehta, and Aruna Raje.

In a parallel exploration, Butalia [2] underscores the influential role of commercial Indian cinema as the most potent medium of communication. Her research indicates that a large number of Indian filmmakers have produced films that tackle social issues that affect women, including marriage, widowhood, rape, domestic violence, gender poverty and dowries. This cinematic initiative progressively increased the appearance of women on screen, moving beyond traditional portrayals and stereotypes. While acknowledging these strides, Butalia urges Indian cinema to place a greater emphasis on balancing the portrayal of women, steering away from perpetuating stereotypes and presenting a more nuanced and equitable representation of women's lives.

Anu Celly, referenced in Jain and Rai (2002) [3], carried out a comprehensive examination of women's portrayal in Indian popular cinema during her research. Celly argued, using semiotic and psychoanalytical methods, that the way women are portrayed in movies differs greatly from the way they actually are in real life. Instead, she argued that women's roles in cinema are shaped by myth, custom, and ritual. Celly also highlighted the prevalence of the victimization syndrome in the image and life history of women in traditional Indian cinema, where the masculine protagonist typically who confines and controls the subjectivity, role and sexuality of the women, turning them into objects. Using Satyajit Ray's film "Devi" as an example, she acknowledged it as a pioneering attempt to show women as protagonists by using myth as a normative template for the idealized conception of womanhood.

Supriya Agarwal, also mentioned in Jain and Rai (2002) [3], delved into the identity of Muslim women in Bollywood Hindi cinema during the period from the 1970s to the 1990s. Agarwal noted that the portrayal of women during this era was often confined to stereotypes, with little consideration given to the women's point of view. Analyzing four films centered around Muslim women - "Pakeezah" (1971), "Nikaah" (1982), "Bazaar" (1982), and "Umrao Jaan" (1982), Agarwal observed the imposition of a secondary position on women by societal forces, portraying them as oppressed by various pressures. The movies frequently took a masculine viewpoint when presenting women, highlighting the idea that women could not be respected or autonomous without the protection and guidance of males. According to Agarwal, in order for society to advance, these problems must be raised and addressed.

Uberoi [4], in her analysis of female's representation in Indian cinema, highlighted two processes: the tropeization of the feminine and the commoditization of women within a larger, hegemonic, and homogenizing cultural framework. She saw that women frequently appear as objects of male desire, dominion and possession in a variety of social and cultural presentation styles. According to Uberoi, there are two primary causes for women's lack of visibility in both the media and society. First of all, women's marginalization in patriarchal rhetoric has kept them from contributing to society to the fullest extent possible. Second, men have dominated society's sustaining beliefs and power, treating women as property and exchanging them with other men in social interactions. Uberoi provided illustrations of various aspects of how women and their bodies are objectified and modified in correlated media, including movies and advertisements. The author stated that the roles that women play in Indian society have been shaped by stereotypes and national culture, which have led to the hegemonization and homogenization of 'womanliness' in national and contemporary culture.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 1. Film Selection:

The selection of films for this comparative analysis was conducted through a meticulous process aimed at capturing the essence of each decade while ensuring diversity in genres, themes, and regional representation. Two films from each decade were chosen based on their cultural impact, critical acclaim, box office success, and their ability to encapsulate the prevailing societal norms and attitudes towards women.

#### 2. Qualitative Analysis:

Qualitative analysis serves as the cornerstone of this research, enabling an in-depth exploration of the selected films. The study employs thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, character arcs, and narrative structures within each film. Additionally, discourse analysis is employed to dissect the dialogues and interactions, unveiling the underlying ideologies and attitudes towards women embedded in the cinematic discourse.

#### 3. Societal Contextualization:

In order to offer a thorough comprehension of the evolving roles of women, every movie is positioned within the social context of its corresponding decade. Examining historical occurrences, societal changes, and feminist movements that may have impacted the filmmakers' viewpoints and story decisions is part of this.

#### Tools for Data Collection:

##### 1. Film Critiques and Reviews:

Academic critiques, film reviews, and scholarly articles form a crucial part of the data collection process. These resources allow for a more nuanced understanding of the cinematic decisions and their influence on viewer perceptions by providing insights into the critical reception of the chosen films.

##### 2. Interviews and Filmmaker Statements:

Direct insights from filmmakers provide invaluable context to the creative decisions behind the portrayal of women in each film. Interviews, articles, and statements from directors, writers, and actors are collected to unravel the intentions and perspectives that shaped the cinematic narrative.

##### 3. Secondary Literature:

Academic literature on gender studies, film theory, and cultural studies is consulted to establish a theoretical framework for the analysis. This literature aids in contextualizing the findings within broader discussions on gender roles, representation, and societal changes.

By employing a multi-faceted approach that integrates film analysis, societal contextualization, and insights from critical and academic sources, this research aims to offer a nuanced exploration of the changing roles of women folk in Indian films.

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this pursuit of data collection, the qualitative research method has been deliberately chosen. The selection of films for this study is grounded in their comparability, sharing common thematic elements that warrant in-depth investigation. These films were meticulously chosen from the realm of nationally and internationally acclaimed cinema.

The chosen films specifically focus on women, delving into their multifaceted issues within diverse situations, particularly concerning gender relations. Through the narratives of these films, various dimensions of women's lives are explored, shedding light on the challenges they encounter in the intricate tapestry of Indian social contexts. Additionally, these films serve as a poignant portrayal of how women navigate and overcome societal and cultural constraints, breaking free from the boundaries that once confined them.

Decade	Films
1980s	Arth, Mirch Masala
1990s	Damini, Bandit Queen
2000s	Dor, Lajja



2010s	Raazi, Pink
2020s	Thappad, Gangubai Kathiawadi

In the 80s, films like "Arth" and "Mirch Masala" captured the essence of the era, delving into intricate narratives and social issues. The 90s witnessed powerful portrayals in "Damini" and "Bandit Queen," shedding light on societal injustices. Moving into the 2000s, films like "Dor" and "Lajja" continued to challenge norms. The 2010s brought contemporary narratives with films like "Raazi" and "Pink," addressing pertinent issues. As we step into the 2020s, "Thappad" and "Gangubai Kathiawadi" are making waves, contributing to the evolving landscape of Indian cinema.

### **The Evolution of Women's Representation in Bollywood: From the Early Days to Present**

During the early stages of its development, Indian cinema was primarily centered on mythological stories and epic tales. It is exemplified by country's first feature films was "Raja Harishchandra," which was directed by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913. As the nation grappled with the struggle for independence, as a potent tool for expressing rage and uniting nationalist leaders and parties against British colonial control, cinema has grown in popularity. However, after Independence, a paradigm shift occurred as Bollywood transitioned into a platform for addressing pressing social problems and issues. Through its lens, the film industry painted a canvas of a society that was not only envisioned but also deemed achievable, fostering a narrative of aspiration and change.

The cinematic zenith of Bollywood unfolded during the illustrious span from the 1950s to the late 1970s, often referred to as the golden era. During this period, Indian cinema vividly depicted a rural India steeped in rich traditions. Films became mirrors reflecting the intricate tapestry of relationships, customs, norms, and ethics woven into the fabric of Indian society. The pressing issue of poverty found poignant articulation on the silver screen. Audiences resonated deeply with on-screen characters whose lives mirrored their own, fostering a profound connection. Notable movies from this era, such as "Kaagaz Ke Phool", "Mother India", "Pakeezah", "Half Ticket" and "Padosan" remain etched in the collective memory. The golden era also marked a pivotal role for women in the film industry, with their characters assuming significant responsibilities in captivating audiences. Women held equally dominant positions alongside their male counterparts in films like "Mother India" (1957), directed by Mehboob Khan, a cinematic endeavor blending socialistic ideals with traditional values, crafted almost 10 years after India gained independence from British rule.

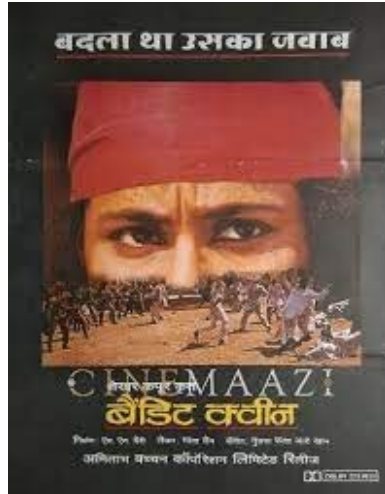
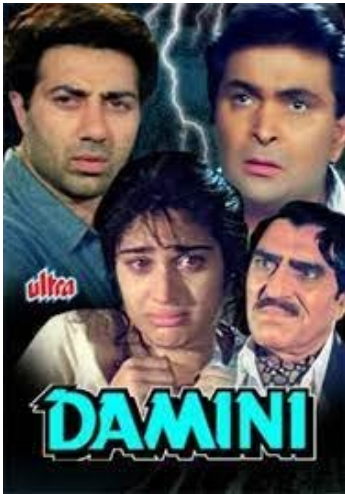
In this comprehensive research paper, we delve into the transformative journey of Bollywood movies spanning from the vibrant era of the 80s to the dynamic landscape of the 2020s. Our focus is on unravelling the nuanced evolution of women's roles within the cinematic realm, intricately intertwined with the ebb and flow of societal norms, the pursuit of gender equality, the empowerment of women, and the myriad influences of evolving social factors. To unravel this cinematic tapestry, we embark on our exploration by examining two pivotal movies from the 80s decade, dissecting how they laid the foundation for the changing portrayal of women in the subsequent cinematic narratives.

In the cinematic masterpiece "Mirch Masala" (1987), crafted by the visionary director Ketan Mehta, the narrative unfolds around Sonbai, portrayed by the talented Smitha Patil. This ordinary village woman boldly rejects the advances of the formidable authority figure, Subedar, the role played by Naseeruddin Shah, bravely standing up to keep herself away from his malevolent intentions. Adding another layer to the tale is Deepti Naval's character, the Mukhiya's wife, who defies her husband's oppressive actions, particularly regarding her determination to educate their daughter. "Mirch Masala" emerges as an impressive chronicle of women's empowerment, showcasing resilience and strength during times marked by societal regressions.



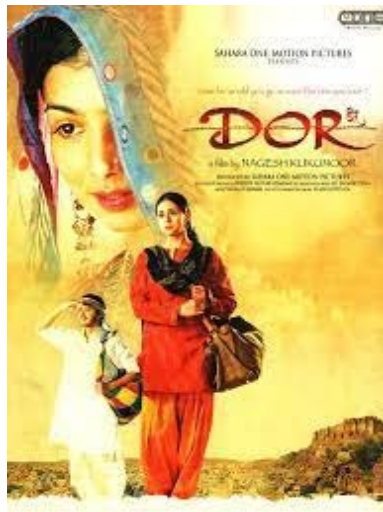
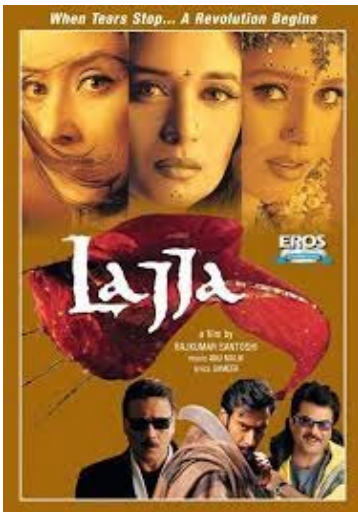
In the poignant narrative of "Arth" (1982), Shabana Azmi embodies the role of a wife who experiences betrayal and abandonment when her husband leaves her for another woman, portrayed by the talented Smita Patil. Helmed by Mahesh Bhatt, the film intricately unfolds the protagonist's journey as she transforms from a woman shattered by betrayal into a symbol of resilience and independence. "Arth" stands as a compelling portrayal of a woman seizing control of her life and finding her path to happiness amidst the complexities of relationships.

In the compelling narrative of "Damini" (1993), Meenakshi Sheshadri portrays the titular character, a woman ensconced in the affluent milieu of her marital home. The storyline unfolds as Damini witnesses her brother-in-law engaging in physical abuse against their maid, prompting her to embark on a courageous quest for truth and justice. Despite facing vehement opposition from her own family, Damini takes a bold stand, eventually leaving her home. Guided by an ex-advocate, she navigates the legal system to seek the justice she fervently pursues.



"Bandit Queen" (1994) delves into the riveting biography of Phoolan Devi, an Indian dacoit portrayed by Seema Biswas, who found herself incarcerated in 1983. The narrative unfolds as Phoolan Devi faces persecution at the hands of the police, transforming her into an icon among the people. The film intricately depicts the tumultuous life of a woman grappling with adversity inflicted by men, ranging from law enforcement to local thugs. Despite the mayhem, Phoolan Devi emerges triumphant, overpowering her adversaries and emerging as a formidable and resilient figure. Directed by Shekhar Kapoor, the film draws inspiration from the biography of Mala Sen's "India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi".

"Lajja" (2001) stands as a powerful cinematic narrative, shedding light on the injustices inflicted upon women by Indian society. Through compelling performances by Mahima Chaudhary, Rekha, Madhuri Dixit and Manisha Koirala, the film skilfully portrays characters grappling with various societal challenges and adversities. Each character resonates with the broader struggles faced by women, creating a poignant and impactful commentary on the societal wrongs endured by the female protagonists.



"Dor" (2006) intricately weaves a tale of two women, hailing from diverse backgrounds and separated by miles, who find an unexpected connection through tragedy. Their bond faces a profound test when one woman holds the destiny of the other's husband in her hands, adding layers of complexity to their newfound friendship.

"Pink" (2016) boldly asserts the principle that when a woman utters 'No,' it unequivocally means 'No.' Regardless of her attire or lifestyle, coercion against her will is unacceptable. Amitabh Bachchan takes on the role of an advocate passionately fighting for the justice of girls ensnared in a legal battle against influential boys from notorious families. The film serves as a powerful voice against the violation of consent and societal stereotypes.



"Raazi," (2018) directed by Meghna Gulzar, is a compelling tale that intricately weaves the complexities of espionage with the strength and resilience of its female protagonist, Sehmat, played by Alia Bhatt. The film transcends traditional gender roles, portraying Sehmat not merely as a pawn in the espionage game but as a courageous and intelligent operative. Set against the backdrop of the 1971 Indo-Pak war, Sehmat, an Indian woman married into a Pakistani military family, becomes a pivotal figure in the intelligence world. The narrative skillfully navigates the challenges Sehmat faces, blending her traditional societal roles with her newfound responsibilities. The character's evolution showcases the multifaceted nature of women, breaking stereotypes and highlighting their capacity for bravery and sacrifice. "Raazi" is a monument to the bravery and tenacity of women in the face of hardship.

In the film "Thappad," (2020) Tapsee Pannu takes on the role of Amrita Sandhu, offering a poignant exploration of the pervasive issue of domestic violence in Indian society. With a commendable blend of solemnity and directness, the movie has been recognized as a crucial social drama that challenges the unspoken norms of marriage. Beyond merely addressing the socio-emotional repercussions of domestic violence, "Thappad" delves into the broader landscape of how women are treated within the legal confines of marriage, shedding light on the entrenched social conditioning imposed by a patriarchal society. Tapsee Pannu's portrayal has received acclaim for her transformative depiction, transitioning from a submissive wife to a resolute woman demanding her rights.





"Gangubai Kathiawadi," (2022) starring Alia Bhatt and directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, unfolds as a visually captivating narrative that traces the remarkable ascent of young Ganga from a small-town girl to the formidable 'Gangubai' in Kamathipura, Mumbai. The film serves as a luxurious depiction of 20th-century Mumbai and the lives of sex workers. Inspired by S. Hussain Zaidi and Jane Borges' account in "Mafia Queens of Mumbai," this biographical drama stands out as a potent female-centric Bollywood production, narrating the compelling story of a demure Indian girl's resilience against societal stigmas. Alia Bhatt's portrayal has been described as an empowering, feminist narrative embedded in a commercially successful and melodramatic cinematic experience.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evolution of women's portrayal in Bollywood films from the 1980s to the present reflects a transformative journey that mirrors the changing dynamics of society. From the struggles depicted in films like "Arth" and "Mirch Masala" to the resilience showcased in "Damini" and the exploration of diverse narratives in "Lajja" and "Pink," Bollywood has increasingly moved towards presenting more nuanced and empowered female characters. The movies from different decades collectively underscore the societal shifts in perceptions of gender roles, moving beyond traditional stereotypes. Recent releases like "Raazi," "Thappad," and "Gangubai Kathiawadi" demonstrate a significant departure from conventional narratives, offering narratives that resonate with contemporary conversations on women's agency, empowerment, and societal impact. As Bollywood continues to challenge norms and provide a platform for diverse stories, it contributes to shaping a narrative that aligns with the evolving roles and aspirations of women in society. The cinematic journey from the 1980s to the present signifies not only a leap in storytelling but also a profound impact on societal perspectives, encouraging a broader and more inclusive understanding of women's roles and contributions.

Moreover, the evolution of women's representation in Bollywood reflects the broader changes in societal attitudes towards gender equality and empowerment. The progression of female characters from mere stereotypes to multifaceted individuals with agency and depth mirrors the ongoing social movements advocating for women's rights and equality. The films serve as a mirror to society, both reflecting and influencing the collective consciousness. As narratives become more inclusive, touching upon issues such as domestic violence, societal expectations, and discrimination, they contribute to a broader discourse on the challenges and triumphs of women in real life.

Additionally, the impact of these evolving portrayals extends beyond the screen, influencing cultural norms and perceptions. Bollywood, as a cultural force, has the power to shape and challenge societal attitudes. The representation of strong, independent, and resilient women on the big screen contributes to breaking down stereotypes and inspiring positive change. The influence of these narratives is felt in various spheres, from discussions in households to policy-making discussions. As the film industry keeps pushing the envelope and investigating new storylines, it is contributing significantly to the creation of a more equal and inclusive society in which women are recognized for their contributions, abilities, and goals rather than being restricted to traditional positions.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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