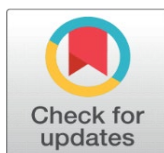


THE POLITICS OF DESIRE: MALE AGGRESSION AND FEMALE AGENCY IN POST-LIBERALIZATION HINDI CINEMA

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.6528](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.6528)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the representation of sexual harassment and coercion in 1990s Hindi cinema, a decade often celebrated for its romantic and family-oriented narratives. While Bollywood's romantic films of this decade foregrounds love and youthful desire, they simultaneously embedded subtle forms of sexual violence, such as stalking, eve-teasing and coercive advances within courtship rituals. Drawing on feminist film theory and Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," the study argues that these cinematic portrayals blurred the line between romance and harassment, presenting male aggression as endearing and female resistance as coyness destined to yield to persistence. Through textual analysis of popular films, this paper highlights how Bollywood constructed a hierarchy of sexual violence, extreme acts like rape were demonised when committed by villains, while "moderate" acts of harassment by heroes were normalised, trivialised and celebrated. The paper argues that these representational strategies not only reinforced patriarchal ideologies but also shaped cultural perceptions of romance, agency and gender roles. The paper underscores how 1990s Hindi cinema functioned as an ideological apparatus that legitimized coercion as love and perpetuated gendered hierarchies.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Romantic Film, Sexual Harassment, Patriarchy, Bollywood

1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural imagination of the Indian society is largely shaped by cinema, particularly, the Hindi cinema which is one of the largest global film economies. India generates over 1,500 films annually across various languages, with Hindi cinema leading in terms of number, influence and audience reach (Ganti, 2012). Hindi films serve not merely as a primary source of entertainment for the masses in India but also as a powerful medium that shapes national identity and cultural values. Since India's Independence in 1947, Hindi films have become a medium for the diverse audiences from different regions of the country to envision themselves as part of a unified nation, even amid persistent social, linguistic and religious divisions (Virdi, 2003). The legacy of Bollywood, spanning more than a century of cinematic history, demonstrates its remarkable ability to adapt to evolving technologies, genres and audience preferences while maintaining a profound emotional connection with viewers across multiple generations (Mazumdar, 2007).

However, despite its significant contributions to popular culture and the construction of national identity, Hindi cinema has faced criticism for its problematic representations of gender and sexuality. The 1990s represent a particular

decade in this context. Building on the commercial triumph of *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988), the romantic genre came to dominate the Hindi film industry throughout the 1990s, emphasizing narratives centred on youthful love, college romances and family melodramas. These romantic narratives were frequently interwoven with normalized and occasionally glorified depictions of sexual harassment and coercion. Male protagonists were commonly portrayed engaging in behaviours such as stalking, teasing or even employing force toward female characters. These actions that were subsequently rewarded through the woman's eventual affection or consent. As Chakravorty (2024) has noted in his analyses of sexuality in Indian cinema, the Bollywood "romantic hero" during this era was often characterized by aggression, persistence and a sense of entitlement to female attention. Thereby crafting a cultural narrative that blurs the distinction between genuine romance and outright harassment.

Films function as mass cultural artifact and does not simply mirror societal realities but they also actively influence perceptions, social norms and everyday behaviours. Historically, Bollywood has operated as a pedagogical arena where conceptions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are disseminated and internalized by audiences (Ganti, 2012). Drawing from Laura Mulvey's ground-breaking theory of the "male gaze" (1975), mainstream cinema frequently structures its visual and narrative elements to prioritize male subjectivity, while reducing women to objects of visual pleasure. Within the framework of Hindi cinema, this male gaze is often expressed through voyeuristic song-and-dance sequences, sexualized cinematography and storylines where women's autonomy and consent are subordinated to male desires. This cinematic structure are often framed with sexual behaviours, encompassing stalking, unwanted advance and physical aggression. Such acts are dramatised and presented as endearing romantic gestures, thereby perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

Sexual violence, in its broadest sense, includes a spectrum of behaviours such as assault, harassment, molestation and rape. According to the World Health Organization, it constitutes a grave public health and human rights issue, leading to enduring psychological, physical and social consequences for survivors (WHO, 2017). Although Hindi cinema explicitly addressed sexual violence in the rape-revenge narratives prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s, the 1990s witnessed a transition toward more subtle yet pervasive manifestations of sexual violence integrated into the romantic genre. Practices like eve-teasing, stalking, non-consensual physical contact and voyeurism emerged as recurrent motifs. They are seldom depicted as problematic issue but instead as essential plot devices facilitating the progression toward romantic resolution. This approach not only diminished the gravity of sexual violence but also reinforced entrenched cultural stereotypes regarding female passivity and male dominance (Sharma & Tripathi, 2023).

The portrayal of sexual harassment in 1990s Hindi cinema was not an isolated occurrence but rather a reflection of broader industrial and cultural dynamics. During this period, the Hindi film industry remained predominantly male-dominated, with directors, producers and screenwriters perpetuating patriarchal ideologies through their on-screen narratives. The commercial necessity of appealing to large-scale audiences further encouraged the reinforcement of conventional gender roles rather than their subversion. As Ranjani Mazumdar (2007) observes, Bollywood has historically been hesitant to challenge established social hierarchies, opting instead to produce narratives that uphold heteronormative and patriarchal ideals. Consequently, the interconnected processes of production, distribution and consumption perpetuated a cultural environment in which coercion was reinforced as passion and women's agency was systematically eroded.

This study positions itself within the framework of feminist film theory to critically analyse the representations of sexual violence and harassment in 1990s Hindi cinema, with a specific emphasis on the romantic genre. Feminist scholars, including Viridi (2003) and Ghosh (2000), have underscored the structural inequalities in cinematic depictions, wherein women are typically positioned as symbolic embodiments of tradition, virtue or desire. Women are seldom portrayed as character who has independent agency. Through this theoretical framework, the analysis will investigate how sexual violence was not merely depicted but systematically normalized and romanticized in films that reached vast audiences. The 1990s emerge as a crucial period for examination due to economic liberalization, the advent of satellite television and the globalization of Bollywood, which collectively broadened its domestic and international influence, thereby magnifying the societal ramifications of these representations (Dwyer, 2006).

The relevance of this research stems from its exploration of how 1990s Hindi films constructed sexual violence as an integral component of romantic discourse, thus contributing to wider inquiry of gender representation in Indian cinema. Although overt crimes like rape and assault have garnered some academic scrutiny within Indian cinema studies, the more subtle forms of harassment, such as eve-teasing, coercive courtship and stalking have received comparatively less attention in scholarly discourse.

As such, this paper seeks to advance feminist critiques of Indian popular cinema by highlighting the gendered dimensions of representation during a transformative decade in Bollywood's evolution. The paper employs content analysis of selected films within the feminist theoretical frameworks to elucidate how sexual violence are depicted, normalised and rationalised under the pretext of romance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hindi cinema stands as one of the most influential cultural industries globally, producing films that captivate audiences both within India and internationally (Rajadhyaksha, 2009). Yet, in addition to its roles in fostering national identity, delivering popular entertainment and promoting cultural unity, Hindi cinema has significantly contributed to the formation of gender ideologies, particularly through its depictions of women and the normalization of sexual violence. The focus here extends beyond isolated representations to the systemic integration of sexual aggression into Bollywood's cinematic language. This review surveys existing scholarship on the intersections of Hindi cinema, sexual violence, and cultural normalization, with a special emphasis on the 1990s, a decade characterized by India's economic liberalization and the expansion of Bollywood's global presence.

Scholarship in film studies has long grappled with the question of whether cinema merely reflects societal norms or actively constructs them. Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model posits that media texts are imbued with dominant ideologies during production but are open to negotiated or oppositional interpretations by audiences (Hall, 1980). In the Indian context, researchers contend that cinema serves dual functions as both a "mirror" and a "molder" of society (Chakravarty, 1993). Mythological films from the pre-independence era conveyed nationalist and moral messages, while post-independence classics such as *Mother India* (1957) and *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) reinforced Gandhian and Nehruvian ideals (Dwyer, 2006). By the 1970s and 1980s, cinematic narratives began to portray exploitative landlords and corrupt officials as antagonists, situating violence within broader socio-economic conflicts.

However, sexual violence in cinema has occupied a more ambiguous terrain throughout its history. As Tamakuwala (2017) highlights in reflections on films like *Pink*, cinema as a mass medium constructs imagery and bolsters dominant values, including those rooted in patriarchy and heteronormativity. Considering that Bollywood draws millions of viewers each week (Butalia, 1984), its portrayals of gender relations wield considerable cultural influence.

Defining Sexual Violence and Eve-Teasing in Cinematic Context Scholars like Majumder (2014) stress that violence extends beyond physical acts to include intimidation, coercion, and harassment, which may appear in everyday contexts as domestic abuse, stalking, or economic control. In India, "eve-teasing", a term for public sexual harassment encompassing catcalling, groping and other intrusions, has been socially normalized (Rana, 2023). Films often diminish these behaviours to mere playful interactions or steps in romantic pursuit. Karnad (2023) contends that this normalisation is most evident in Bollywood, where heroes routinely partake in harassment which are framed as flirtation.

These depictions blur the line between harassment and courtship, thereby normalising such acts in the film narrative. As Gupta and Roy (1998) notes that when protagonists engage in eve-teasing as a valid means of attraction, it implies that women are expected to reciprocate eventually. The heroine's ultimate acceptance thus legitimizes harassment as an acceptable expression of masculinity.

In an analysis of nine Bollywood blockbusters from the 1990s, Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2003) revealed that over 40% of sexual scenes involved violence, with nearly 70% of these instances featuring heroes as perpetrators. Critically, the portrayal of violence varied based on the character's role, Heroes typically committed "moderate" aggression, such as stalking, teasing or unsolicited touching, which was normalised and treated humorously. Villains, conversely, perpetrated "severe" aggression, like rape or sadistic acts, depicted as morally wrong and met with punishment (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003).

This dichotomy is exemplified in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), where the heroine's introduction features a sexualized gaze sequence with male students harassing her, inviting audience complicity in the objectification rather than sympathy for her unease. In contrast, villainous sexual assaults in films like *Hero No. 1* (1997) are framed as reprehensible, prompting heroic rescue. The resulting ideological contradiction suggests that harassment by heroes is innocuous and romantic, whereas identical actions by villains warrant condemnation.

Feminist Film Theory and the Male Gaze concept offers an essential framework for unpacking these inconsistencies. Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "male gaze" argues that mainstream cinema renders women as passive objects for

male visual gratification, aligning with patriarchal desires. Bollywood replicates this through the fetishisation of female bodies in voyeuristic song sequences and camera techniques (Ganti, 2004). As Viridi (2003) asserts, even when women occupy central roles, their agency is constrained, often absorbed into patriarchal frameworks of romance and family.

Moreover, Rajendran (2019) emphasises that the male-centric production of Bollywood perpetuates male viewpoints, marginalising female subjectivity. The repeated motif of women “accepting” harassment as love exemplifies this erasure, disregarding women’s real experiences of fear and violation. Bollywood celebrities enjoy immense followings, positioning their behaviours as aspirational (Dudrah, 2006). When heroes successfully stalk or coerce heroines, viewers may internalize these tactics as viable in reality. Gopalan (2002) describes cinema as an educational realm where gender relation scripts are practiced and propagated. This is particularly alarming given India’s sexual violence statistics. While National Crime Records Bureau data indicates rising reports since the 1990s, underreporting persists, hindering direct links between media and crime (Kapur, 2012). Thus, critics maintain that filmic normalization fosters a “rape culture” by undermining women’s autonomy

3. ANALYSIS

This analysis employs a textual analysis framework, informed by feminist film theory, to interpret the portrayals of sexual violence in a selection of prominent Hindi films. Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings outlined in the introduction and literature review the study categorises and interprets sexual scenes across high grossing Bollywood films in the 1990s. These films, emblematic of the decade’s dominant romantic genre, exemplify how subtle forms of sexual violence such as eve-teasing, stalking and coercive advances are normalised and romanticised. Thus reinforcing patriarchal ideologies and heteronormative ideals.

The representation of sexual behaviour and sexual violence in Hindi cinema of the 1990s reveals a deeply entrenched patriarchal logic in which gender relations are defined through asymmetries of power, control, and desire. A close reading of popular films of the period demonstrates that sexual interaction was typically represented through two dominant modes, consensual encounters and sexually violent encounters. While consensual scenes depicted mutual interest between characters, sexual violence appeared in the form of harassment, coercion, stalking and rape. The decade witnessed a normalisation of such representations, often represented as humour, romance or melodrama, thereby embedding misogynistic ideas in mainstream cinematic narratives (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003).

Consensual sexual behaviour was typically depicted in sequences where both characters expressed willingness and no visible harm was involved. These were often framed within romance and song-and-dance numbers, thereby marking the relationship as socially legitimate. In contrast, sexually violent scenes encompassed a spectrum of non-consensual acts, ranging from verbal abuse, stalking, and eve-teasing to more extreme forms such as rape and attempted rape. Such violence, as feminist film scholars argue, must be understood as part of the broader gendered discourse of Indian cinema, where women’s agency is continually suppressed and their bodies become sites of male assertion (Viridi, 2003).

In the film, *Dil* (1990), the protagonist, Raja character abducts Madhu and threatens her with rape. Although the assault does not materialise, the very act of abduction and threat is framed as a lesson to ‘tame’ the woman. The film normalises harassment by allowing the male protagonist to emerge unscathed as the hero despite his use of sexual intimidation. Such scenes are a testament of what Jyotika Viridi (2003) identifies as the disciplining of female desire where women are reminded of their vulnerability and male power is reinforced under the guise of moral correction.

Similarly, many films in 1990s Hindi film use the trope of eve-teasing, a pervasive form of public harassment in Indian social life. Defined as intrusive sexual behaviour in public spaces, eve-teasing was repeatedly shown as harmless fun or a preliminary stage of courtship.

In the film *Aankhen* (1993), Bunu and Munnu harasses two women in the song ‘*Laal Dupatte Wali*,’ despite the women’s constant rejection. The male character’s persistence is treated as comic entertainment, underscoring how female resistance is trivialised while male aggression is valorised. Such trope of harassment by teasing resonates with Mulvey’s (1975) theory of male gaze where women in film are portrayed as mere spectacle for male visual and physical control.

The representation of perpetrators and victims in these films reveals significant double standards. While villains’ acts of sexual violence and non-consensual moves are depicted as evil and condemned, the hero’s similar behaviour of non-consensual acts such as stalking, coercion and harassment in the public spaces are represented as expressions of love or masculine charm. In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), Rahul, the hero routinely eve-teases women, including the

heroine Anjali, through leering and invasive proximity during college scenes. These acts are casual, unremarked upon and rewarded with affection in the film as such acts are normalised. Similarly, Hero No. 1 (1997) the hero, Rajesh Malhotra condemns the villainous rape attempts as evil, yet his own flirtatious harassment of the heroine in the film is portrayed as endearing banter. Thus, normalising such non-consensual act in the film.

In another film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) where the female protagonist Simran is shown as a dutiful daughter whose desires are subordinated to the authority of her father Baldev, while Raj is presented as a progressive romantic hero. His insistence on winning Simran despite her repeated discomfort reveals the limits of female autonomy in the narrative. Rahul gains admiration for seeking paternal consent, masking his initial coercive flirtations of stalking Simran across Europe as respectful pursuit. This narrative erases women's independent desires and reinforces the female character as a passive character with little or no agency.

The framing of sexual violence and harassment in the films studied shows a clear distinction between severe violence and 'moderate' acts. Severe violence such as rape, molestation and murder are usually ascribed to the villain character. However, the 'moderate' acts such as eve-teasing, stalking, harassment and domestic coercion are ascribed to the protagonist characters.

Raj's persistent pursuit of Simran in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) through stalking and unsolicited advances is framed as romantic in the film. The tonal framing of such acts further complicates their representation. Harassment is frequently embedded within comedy, romance and musical spectacle, thereby trivialising the seriousness of the act. In song sequence of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), where Rahul humiliates Anjali by unravelling her sari in a basketball match. The scene portrayed harassment as playful flirtation and as such framing of harassment perpetuate cultural myths that women secretly enjoy coercive advances.

The late 1990s also saw films that engaged with female sexuality through the dichotomy of purity and promiscuity. In *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997) Rahul mocks Nisha for her revealing clothes. He continuously shames her for her choice of clothing, but he keeps on praising Pooja for her modesty. He stalks Pooja in the film during grocery shopping and bullies her publicly. This is depicted as 'fun' despite Pooja's distress. Thus, it portrays stalking and harassment of Pooja as humorous but underplays her visible discomfort. These scenes overlook consent among adults and portrays women as an object for male desire.

Such representations reveal the ideological function of Hindi cinema during the 1990s where the male character has the freedom to do what he desires whether if it has to do with sexual harassment as these are portrayed as romantic. While the decade of 1990 is celebrated for as a decade for romance and family drama cinema, women's autonomy remained heavily circumscribed on screen, and they are represented with no agency. Sexual violence was not only present in the film's narrative, but they are depicted as an essential plot device to provide moments of comedy, romance and melodramatic conflict.

4. CONCLUSION

The prevalence of sexually violent imagery within the film analysed highlights the ways in which cinema functions not merely as entertainment but also as a pedagogical and ideological apparatus. In the 1990s, a period marked by India's post-liberalization cultural transformations, cinema became a key site through which gendered hierarchies and patriarchal ideologies are reinforced to mass audiences.

A consistent finding across the films analysed is the gender divide in the roles of victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. Female characters are almost invariably positioned as the violated subjects, while male characters occupy the role of aggressors, whether coded as heroes, villains or comedians. This recurring pattern reinforces traditional patriarchal ideologies that equate masculinity with aggression and femininity with passivity and victimhood (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). Although sexual violence has long been present in Hindi cinema, the 1990s codified a distinct narrative formula whereby the violation of women became not only normalised but also, at times, celebrated as part of romantic courtship.

There is also a dichotomy of representation between the act perpetrated by the villain and that of the hero. Villains typically commit severe sexual crimes such as rape, which are unequivocally condemned within the narrative. By contrast, heroes engage in moderate forms of sexual act such eve-teasing, stalking, harassment which are portrayed as playful, romantic, and desirable. This duality constructs a problematic hierarchy of violence in which only extreme acts are portrayed as socially unacceptable, while milder forms are excused, trivialised and normalised with the heroine's

eventual affection. The effect is to blur the boundaries between coercion and romance, thereby embedding sexual harassment into the cultural grammar of cinematic romance.

The aesthetic strategies of Hindi cinema in the 1990s further reinforced this normalization. Techniques such as playful song sequences, choreographed pursuit, comic subplots and the use of camera angles or music often served to eroticize coercive interactions. These cinematic devices mediated harassment as spectacle, transforming gendered violence into moments of pleasure for both on-screen characters and audiences. By presenting sexual aggression as part of the fantasy of romance, Hindi cinema systematically shaped spectators' perceptions of what constitutes acceptable male behaviour. Studies on media effects underscore that viewers are more likely to identify with and imitate likeable or aspirational characters (Cohen, 2011). Thus, heroes embody aggression as a marker of masculinity and such behaviours are framed as normative in the narrative.

Films analysed for this study reinforces in the discourse of sexual violence where it legitimises harassment, justify male pursuit and silence women's agency. The trope of 'no means yes' is pervasive in the 1990s romance Hindi film where it legitimised stalking and coercion as strategies of love. Thereby shaping generations of audiences to view harassment not as a crime but as a necessary step in winning affection.

Moreover, these narratives contribute to the control of female desire in significant ways. Women who resist advances are depicted as coy or repressed, eventually yielding to male persistence, which affirms the patriarchal notion that female sexuality requires male initiation and conquest (Chakravarty, 1993). The cinematic representation of women's desire as dependent on male aggression undermines female autonomy and perpetuates the dichotomy of good versus bad women, where the virtuous heroine endures harassment but ultimately conforms to heteronormative romance, while the sexually expressive woman is shamed or punished.

While this study interrogates the pervasive presence of sexual violence in Hindi cinema of the 1990s, it also recognizes its limitations. By focusing exclusively on the decade's top-grossing films, other significant cultural texts both within Hindi cinema and across regional industries remain outside the scope of analysis. Future research could extend this inquiry by examining regional cinemas or comparing Hindi films with global film industries to assess how cultural specificity interacts with transnational patterns of sexual violence on screen. Additionally, more empirical audience studies are required to explore the actual impact of such portrayals on social attitudes and behaviours, particularly in light of India's shifting socio-political context and the emergence of new cinematic sensibilities.

The analysis of the film underscore how Hindi cinema, particularly in the 1990s, played an active role in constructing sexual violence as a normalised and even romanticised feature of social life. Through its representations, cinema not only reflected but also reinforced the patriarchal structures that dominate Indian society. By portraying the hero's masculinity with aggression and scripting women's resistance as merely non-existent, these films perpetuated a cultural meaning in which harassment is normalised being part of romantic narratives. Thus, the portrayal of sexual violence in 1990s Hindi cinema cannot be dismissed as mere entertainment. It is an articulation of power relations where it reinforced gender hierarchy and a pedagogy of desire that shapes a particular narrative toward women and sexuality. As Indian cinema continues to evolve, particularly in the wake of feminist movements and public debates on violence against women, it becomes imperative to interrogate and resist the cinematic codes that normalize sexual violence.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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