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# From Margins to Centre: Tracing Women's Narrative Agency in Indian Cinema Over the Past Eight Decades

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**Abstract:** This study examines the evolution of women's narrative agency in Indian cinema across eight decades (1955-2025), analysing twenty-one landmark films through four dimensions: narrative position, economic agency, voice, and endings. Employing qualitative methodology and intersectional feminist frameworks, the research explores how cinema has shifted from portraying women's suffering as a moral virtue to legitimizing their refusal and self-prioritization. Key findings reveal five major transformations: the move from sanctified suffering to justified refusal, economic agency emerging as necessary but insufficient for liberation, voice evolving from patriarchal reinforcement to strategic leverage, endings functioning as yardsticks for social change, and intersectional determinants of agency. The study proposes a 'Spiral of Progress' framework demonstrating how contemporary cinema returns to structural critique while equipped with expanded imaginative possibilities. Films like *The Great Indian Kitchen* validate individual escape while acknowledging systemic persistence, representing a paradox: cinema can imagine liberation it cannot materially produce. The research demonstrates that while women have moved from narrative margins to the centre, intersectional analysis reveals who gets represented, challenging claims about 'women's empowerment' in Indian cinema.

**Keywords:** Gender Justice, Legal Aid, Human Rights, Access to Justice, Marginalized Genders, Systemic Barriers, Cultural Barriers.

## INTRODUCTION

In the opening sequence of Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), Radha stands as a monument to sacrifice—aged, weathered, inaugurating a canal that symbolizes national progress built upon her personal sacrifice. She embodies what would become Indian cinema's foundational female archetype: the woman whose agency exists solely to uphold traditional values, whose voice articulates duty over desire, whose narrative centrality reinforces her marginalization. Nearly eight decades later, in Jeo Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), the protagonist walks out of her marital home, choosing

economic independence and autonomy over domestic servitude. Yet the film's final frames return to that same kitchen, where a new daughter-in-law begins the cycle anew, suggesting that while individual women may escape, patriarchal structures remain unchanged. The distance between these two moments, Radha's hallowed suffering and the contemporary avatar's refusal, represents a complex spiral of various dimensions.

This research examines how women's narrative agency has evolved in Indian cinema from 1955 to 2025, analysing twenty-one landmark films across eight decades through four analytical dimensions:

narrative position, economic agency, voice, and endings. 'Narrative agency' connotes the capacity of the character to drive the plot, have a consequential impact, control resources, and shape outcomes. While feminist film scholarship has extensively documented women's objectification through the male gaze (Mulvey and Pleasure, 1975) and their tokenization in commercial cinema (Ganti, 2013), lesser attention has been given to the historical evolution of women as narrative agents, protagonists rather than objects, decision-makers rather than victims, speakers rather than the spoken-about.

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a qualitative analysis of films ranging from the foundational epics of the 1950s, the parallel cinema in the 1970s-80s, the feminist themes in the 1990s-2000s, and the portrayal in contemporary cinema. The films that were studied for this research were chosen due to their historical significance and diversity. Each decade contributes two or three films chosen for their pivotal representation of women, their impact, and their effort to highlight key facets of gender representation. *Mother India*, *Pyasa*, and *Devdas* of the 1950s establish archetypes of the suffering mother, the stigmatized sex worker, and women who hover around male tragedy. Shyam Benegal's parallel cinema of the 1970s, including *Ankur*, *Bhumika*, and *Mandi*, exposes how caste, class, and capitalism influence women's agency. Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* (1982) and Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) highlight moments when women's refusal of marriage and heteronormality are narratively acceptable. The 2010s comprise women's portrayal of narratives that had been previously reserved for men through movies such as *Queen* (Vikas Bahl, 2003) and *Kahaani* (Sujoy Ghosh, 2012). In the 2020s, *Thappad* (Anubhav Sinha, 2020), *The Great Indian Kitchen* (Jeo Baby, 2021), and *Darlings* (Jasmeet Reen, 2022) validate exit by an individual while acknowledging the persistence of systemic issues.

This study synthesizes feminist film theory with intersectional analysis. Feminist film theory condemns classical cinema for its stereotyped representation of women and discusses possibilities for representations of female subjectivity and desire. Laura Mulvey's examination of the male gaze illustrates how classical cinema positions women as objects of scopophilic pleasure rather than subjects of narrative action. However, this study moves beyond objectification to examine narrative agency, including instances where women are decision-making protagonists and express their own desire. The intersectionality framework helps understand that women's agency is fractured along axes of caste, class, region, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1988).

The four analytical dimensions of narrative position, economic agency, voice, and endings have been proposed as follows:

- a) Narrative position asks whether the woman protagonist is driving the plot or is a supporting character in a man's story? Does she exist independently or primarily in relation to male characters?
- b) Economic agency examines whether women control resources, earn income, and possess financial independence. Economic autonomy, while insufficient for complete liberation, remains a material prerequisite for exit from oppressive situations.
- c) Voice analyses not only whether women speak up, but what they speak about. Do they reinforce traditional values, express suffering, refuse demands, or use speech and silence as instruments of agency?
- d) Endings function as statements, revealing whether the film punishes transgression, validates compromise, celebrates independence, or critiques the structures that it depicts. The shift from sacrificial endings that glorify women's suffering (*Mother India*) to triumphant assertions of independence (*Queen*) to critiques of structure that acknowledge individual freedom alongside systemic persistence (*The Great Indian Kitchen*) reveals evolving cultural propositions of women's possible futures.

This study makes three contributions to existing scholarship. First, it provides a systematic analysis spanning eight decades, revealing new patterns. Second, it focuses on intersectionality, demonstrating that 'women in Indian cinema' focuses often on upper-caste, urban, Hindi-film experiences while marginalizing regional cinema and working-class narratives. Third, instead of a linear advancement, it proposes a 'spiral of progress' with expanded possibilities unavailable in previous eras.

The findings reveal five major thematic evolutions. First, Indian cinema has shifted from portraying women's suffering as a moral virtue to legitimizing refusal and self-prioritization. Second, economic agency has evolved from stigmatized survival strategy such as sex work and service labour, to professional achievement. Despite becoming economically independent it still remains insufficient against structural violence. Third, voice has transformed from reinforcing patriarchal authority to selective deployment such as leveraging silence and refusal. Fourth, endings function as markers, shifting from sacrifice to ambiguity to triumph to systemic critique. Fifth, intersectional analysis exposes divergences in what 'empowerment' means: for upper-caste middle-class women it signifies self-discovery and career success, while for working-class and lower caste women it means survival, protection of children, and navigating violence.

The implications extend beyond film studies to social

change. Eightty years of showing women's agency on screen has coincided with transformations in women's legal rights, participation in workforce, and political representation in India. Yet as *The Great Indian Kitchen's* cyclical ending suggests, cinema increasingly acknowledges its own powerlessness to transform the society structures it critiques. Can representation in cinema rehearse alternative gender relations, making them thinkable and eventually achievable? Or does cinematic liberation allow imaginative escape while material structures persist? This study traces those tensions across eight decades, revealing how Indian cinema has moved women from the margins to the centre of the narrative.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly examination of women's representation in Indian cinema emerges from three intersecting traditions. Feminist film theory's critique of visual pleasure and gendered spectatorship, approaches to cultural and structural production, and postcolonial feminist analyses of how gender intersects with nation, caste, and modernity. This literature review maps these theoretical lineages while identifying gaps, especially the absence of a diachronic analysis that spans multiple decades and insufficient attention to intersectional specificity in women's agency.

#### Feminist Film Theory and the Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's seminal work in 1975 on narrative cinema and visual pleasure established the framework for understanding how classical Hollywood cinema portrays women as objects of the male gaze, positioned to be looked at rather than to look, to be acted upon rather than to act. Mulvey's approach identifies two modes of visual pleasure: scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and narcissistic identification. While Mulvey's framework has been applied to Bollywood's productions, including focus on the female body through song sequences and item numbers, her binary model of active male/passive female has its limitations. Teresa de Lauretis (1984) extends Mulvey by theorizing how women negotiate positions within as well as outside of the dominant representations, which is relevant to Indian cinema wherein women embody tradition and modernity, victimhood and agency, simultaneously. E. Ann Kaplan (1983) adds a further layer to this framework by examining how some films offer a counter perspective where female characters occupy positions of visual authority. This nuance proves essential for analyzing films like *Kahaani* where the pregnant protagonist commands the camera and portrays investigative authority, or *Fire* where female desire disrupts standard beliefs. However, this study demonstrates that the reversal of norms does not automatically constitute narrative agency or economic control.

#### Indian Cinema: National Allegory and Gender

Sumita Chakravarty (1993) posits that post-independence Hindi cinema positioned women as repositories of tradition even as men navigated modernity. Chakravarty demonstrates how films like *Mother India* constructed the suffering mother as national symbol, her body literally equivalent to the soil she cultivates. This allegory highlights how Radha's agency serves the community rather than personal ends by embodying the nation itself, making individual desire inappropriate. Chakravarty's work establishes the influence of historical context but only till 1987, missing key transformations in the liberalized period of 1990s and beyond. Madhava Prasad (1998) examines the feudal family romance structure, where romantic desire is perpetually deferred and subordinated to family authority. Prasad argues that women are objects of exchange between men, their marriages consolidating familial alliances rather than expressing individual choice. However, his viewpoint struggles to account for contemporary films like *Queen* or *Thappad* where women explicitly reject marriage and family demands. This suggests the emergence of alternative narrative structures that merit systematic investigation. Ranjani Mazumdar (2007) demonstrates how the city offers women the danger of sexual violence and the possibility of economic independence. She explains why films like *Arth* position urban environs as a condition for exit from oppressive marriages, while rural settings in *Mother India* or *Ankur* constrain mobility and reinforce traditional gender roles. However, this perspective overlooks the different spatial politics in regional cinema.

#### Parallel Cinema and Social Realism

Parallel cinema emphasizes its structural critique of gender oppression. Ravi Vasudevan (2000) analyses how parallel cinema exposed intersections of caste, class, and gender. Films like *Ankur* and *Bhumika* are celebrated for depicting how lower caste women navigate exploitation. It is unclear whether parallel cinema offers genuine agency or merely sympathetic victimhood. This study argues that parallel cinema exposes the insufficiency of individual agency against structural oppression.

#### Intersectionality, Caste, and Class

Crenshaw (1991) provides crucial framework for understanding how caste, class, religion, and sexuality compound gender oppression in ways that single-axis analysis cannot capture. While developed in U.S. Black feminist context, intersectionality can also be applied to studies on Indian cinema. Sharmila Rege (1995) demonstrates how caste stigma and sexual objectification converge in the representation of lavani dancers, making their agency simultaneously economic (they earn income) and

constrained due to stigmatized labour. However, scholarly work on mainstream Hindi cinema scholarship often erases caste analysis. Films like *Queen*, *Kahaani*, and *Thappad* are analyzed as women's empowerment narratives without acknowledging the upper caste privileges of their protagonists. This study argues that claims about women's agency in Indian cinema need to specify which women, whose agency, under what material conditions. The agency available to Vidya in *Kahaani*, which includes professional credentials, institutional access, presumed innocence, is different from the constrained survival tactics of Lakshmi in *Ankur* or Mumtaz in *Chandni Bar*.

### Regional Cinema

The dominance of Hindi cinema marginalizes the gender politics of regional cinema. Selvaraj Velayutham (2008) demonstrates how Tamil cinema produced different representations of women's agency, particularly around upper caste patriarchy. Malayalam cinema's leftist tradition, portrayed through *The Great Indian Kitchen*, proposes structural critique that Hindi mainstream cinema often dilutes into individual empowerment narratives. Bengali cinema's early representation of middle-class working women reflected Bengal's specific history of women's education and participation in the workforce. This regional diversity suggests that any generalization about women's representation in Indian cinema needs to acknowledge regional specifications.

### Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite ample scholarly work on women in Indian cinema, the following significant gaps persist. First, most studies focus on a single decade or movement (parallel cinema, liberalization-era Bollywood) instead of a diachronic analysis. There is scant literature on representational evolution across eight decades, making it difficult to identify long-term patterns. Second, intersectional analysis remains underdeveloped; through caste is discussed in literary work related to parallel cinema but it is scarce in contemporary films.

This study addresses the first two gaps through a qualitative analysis of twenty-one films across eighty years, focusing on intersectional specificity throughout. It demonstrates that the evolution of women's narrative is neither a linear progression nor a simple repetition. It is proposed as a spiral which returns to earlier critiques on structure but with additional imaginative possibilities. This study synthesizes feminist film theory and intersectional analysis to explain how Indian cinema has reimagined women's agency from the margins to the centre.

### METHODOLOGY

Qualitative analysis has been used in this study for thematic coding of the evolution of women's narrative agency across eight decades of Indian cinema. The research design is grounded in interpretive traditions recognizing that meaning-making in cinema emerges through narrative structure, dialogue, visual composition, and performative elements. Purposive sampling was used to select twenty-one films (see Table 1) across eight decades (1955-2025), with two or three films per decade chosen based on three criteria: historical significance (critical acclaim, or commercial success), representational diversity (varied traditions, or class/caste perspectives), and analytical richness (highlighted distinct dimensions of women's agency). This approach prioritizes depth, and acknowledges that these films cannot statistically represent all Indian cinema but offer theoretically productive case studies for examining representational patterns and transformations. Each film was viewed multiple times to enable layered analysis. Initial viewings focused on narrative comprehension, plot structure and character trajectories. Subsequent viewings involved taking notes. During viewing sessions, notes included specific scenes, dialogue excerpts, and visual elements. The explicit content including what characters say and do, and the implicit meanings including how the scene was enacted and the cinematography. For instance, analysis of *Kahaani* noted not only that Vidya Bagchi investigates her husband's murder but how camera angles position her as commanding subject rather than vulnerable object.

Table 1: Sample from Eight Decades

SN	Name of Film	Decade
1	Devdas	1950s
2	Mother India	
3	Pyasa	
4	Bandini	1960s
5	Guide	
6	Waqt	
7	Ankur	1970s
8	Sholay	
9	Bhumika	
10	Arth	1980s
11	Mandi	
12	Mirch Masala	
13	Bandit Queen	1990s
14	Fire	
15	Chandni Bar	2000s
16	Paheli	
17	Kahaani	2010s
18	Queen	
19	Thappad	2020s
20	The Great Indian Kitchen	
21	Darlings	

## ANALYSIS

The notes were categorised into four predetermined analytical dimensions: narrative position (protagonist versus supporting role, relationship to male characters, narrative focus), economic agency (sources of income, financial independence, control over resources), voice (dialogue content, articulation of desire or refusal, strategic silence), and endings (character outcomes, ideological implications, structural critique or validation). After data was collected, notes were analyzed through iterative thematic coding. Initial open coding identified recurring patterns within each analytical dimension. For example, under 'voice,' codes included *moral voice reinforcing patriarchy*, *articulation of suffering*, *explicit refusal*, and *strategic silence*. Axial coding then established relationships between codes, revealing how voice evolution related to shifts in economic agency and narrative position across decades. Finally, selective coding coalesced patterns into themes: the shift from suffering-as-virtue to refusal, economic agency, voice as strategic performance, endings as ideological statements, and influence of intersectionality on agency. The qualitative analysis was informed by feminist film theory, especially Mulvey's gaze theory, and Crenshaw's intersectionality theory which helped in interpretative critique.

## FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis of twenty-one films across eight decades reveals five major findings about the evolution of women's narrative agency in Indian cinema.

### Finding 1: Narrative - From Sanctified Suffering to Justified Refusal

In the 1950s-1960s, films like *Mother India* and *Devdas* considered those females as heroines who suffered and sacrificed. Radha's ultimate act of killing her son to uphold morality of the village defines her as national symbol through personal loss. Her iconic dialogue, "This is my land, this is my soil, and I will deliver its justice," articulates voice in service of the community. Similarly, Paro and Chandramukhi in *Devdas* remain psychologically bound to a man who causes them suffering, their devotion framed as virtue rather than entrapment. This changed in the 1980s-1990s when Pooja in *Arth* refuses her husband's attempt to reconcile with the declaration: "I am very happy without you, Inder. For the first time in my life, I am happy." This makes women's refusal of a compromised marriage a justified narrative. *Fire* extends this when Radha articulates feelings that are not sanctioned in heteronormative families. In the 2020s, *Thappad*'s Amrita leaves her marriage after 'just one slap,' and the film validates her right to

dignity without demanding she prove systematic abuse. *The Great Indian Kitchen*'s protagonist simply walks out, her action speaking louder than words. This evolution demonstrates cinema's shift from punishing women's self-prioritization to celebrating it as justified right.

### Finding 2: Economic Agency as Necessary but Insufficient

Women's economic independence alone proves insufficient for full liberation, even though it evolves from stigmatized survival strategy to professional achievement. Films from the 1950s-1980s predominantly portray women's economic agency in marginalized sectors such as commercial sex work (*Pyasa*, *Chandni Bar*), performance (*Guide*, *Bhumika*), or subsistence agriculture (*Mother India*). These women earn but face social stigma or structural exploitation. Gulabo in *Pyasa* can financially support the poet but cannot escape societal judgment. Mumtaz in *Chandni Bar* earns income but remains trapped in criminalized economy, her children eventually also becoming marginalized. The 1980s-2000s witness professional economic agency becoming prerequisite for escape. *Arth*'s Pooja can refuse her husband because she has a singing career. *Kahaani*'s Vidya Bagchi commands institutional resources as insurance investigator, her professional capability assumed rather than justified. Economic independence enables the physical and psychological exit that transforms possibility into reality. However, 2020s films complicate this narrative. *Darlings* shows working-class women (railway ticket collector, beautician) with economic agency who nonetheless suffer domestic violence. Economic independence does not automatically translate to leaving abusive relationships when income remains insufficient for independent household maintenance and social pressure demands marital preservation. *The Great Indian Kitchen* reveals how educated women capable of employment can be treated as unpaid domestic labour through marriage. This reveals that economic agency must be accompanied by physical autonomy, social support, ideological shift, and structural change to enable genuine liberation.

### Finding 3: Voice Evolution from Reinforcement to Strategic Leverage

Voice of the woman transforms from reinforcing patriarchal order to strategic deployment including silence as choice. *Mother India*'s Radha speaks with commanding moral authority but does not articulate any personal desire. *Bandini*'s Kalyani questions herself internally but remains deferential externally. The 1970s parallel cinema portrays minimal dialogue of Lakshmi from *Ankur*, her constrained voice representing structural silencing of Dalit women. The 1980s-1990s introduce refusal voice. *Arth* and *Fire*

protagonists articulate desires and happiness without men, which was previously considered illegitimate. *Bandit Queen* shows voice emerging through violence, Phoolan Devi's command voice enabled by holding guns, raising the question whether women need violence to be heard. Contemporary cinema demonstrates voice as strategic instrument. *Kahaani's* Vidya Bagchi lies throughout the film, revealing truth only for maximum impact. Voice becomes information control, misdirection, and calculated performance. *Thappad's* Amrita has a measured speech, insists without anger, refuses gaslighting through consistent boundary articulation. *The Great Indian Kitchen* complicates this by showing voice's insufficiency. The protagonist articulates frustration multiple times but the domestic space absorbs without response, suggesting that voice alone cannot dismantle structures that refuse to hear.

#### **Finding 4: Endings as Yardsticks for Social Change**

Film endings reveal dominant cultural attitudes more clearly than the narrative. The evolution from sacrificial (*Mother India's* isolated aging), to ambiguous (*Bhumika's* uncertain future), to triumphant (*Queen's* joyful independence), to structurally-critical (*The Great Indian Kitchen's* individual exit alongside systemic continuation) maps changing social imagination. The 2020s represent a sophisticated return to ambiguity. The protagonists achieve personal freedom while films acknowledge that their escape does not dismantle structures oppressing the next woman.

#### **Finding 5: Intersectional Determinants of Agency**

The analysis of this study finds that women's agency is not universal but fractured along caste, class, and regional lines. The narratives about empowerment are focused on self-discovery and professional success, and these are based on upper-caste middle-class women, such as in the films *Queen*, *Kahaani*, and *Thappad*. Working-class women as portrayed in the films *Chandni Bar* and *Darlings*, face survival economics and structural violence. Dalit women experience compounded oppression where agency emerges only through outlaw violence or remains structurally foreclosed, as in films *Ankur* and *Bandit Queen*. Mainstream Hindi cinema increasingly erases caste markers, creating false universalism, while regional cinema maintains intersectional critique.

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this eight-decade analysis illustrate how Indian cinema negotiates women's agency, revealing that on-screen representation, imaginative possibility, and persistent structural constraint occur simultaneously. This discussion synthesizes the five major findings to propose a framework referred to as a 'spiral of progress'. This framework proposes a

looped engagement with feminist concerns i.e. going back to earlier critiques with updated and expanded representational tools.

#### **The Representational Paradox**

A key emerging pattern from this analysis may be referred to as the 'agency paradox'. Contemporary cinema imagines the complete narrative agency for women while at the same time, it exposed how patriarchal structures cannot be dismantled by any individual agency. *The Great Indian Kitchen's* cyclical ending crystallizes this paradox. The unnamed protagonist achieves personal liberation through exit, yet the film's return to the kitchen where a new bride begins the same cycle, insists that individual escape does not translate to collective transformation. This paradox challenges prevailing scholarly narratives that propose representational evolution as feminist victory. *Thappad* validates Amrita's divorce while showing her lawyer friend trapped in her own abusive marriage, acknowledging that all women do not possess the economic security, family support, and social capital that enable exit. *Darlings* presents mother-daughter violence against an abuser with moral ambiguity, but does not celebrate revenge as liberation. This representational self-awareness suggests Indian cinema has evolved beyond simplistic empowerment narratives toward more complex engagement with structural feminism. The shift from *Arth's* triumphant solitude (1982) to *The Great Indian Kitchen's* structural persistence (2021) is a sign of maturity of thought that individual women's agency is worth celebrating, but cannot substitute for dismantling caste patriarchy, economic exploitation, and institutionalized violence.

#### **Intersectionality**

The finding that agency varies dramatically by caste and class requires immediate attention. Mainstream representation is dominated by the experiences of upper-caste, middle-class women, however women in Indian cinema are portrayed as a universal category. Films like *Queen*, *Kahaani*, and *Thappad* never mention caste, creating 'caste-free zones'. This erasure is suggestively political, and suggests that some of the problems faced by women such as unhappy marriages, unfulfilling careers, or lack of romantic choice merit cinematic attention while others undergoing caste violence, poverty, or criminalized labour, appear only in parallel cinema or regional productions with limited circulation.

The contrast between *Ankur's* Lakshmi and *Kahaani's* Vidya Bagchi illustrates this divergence. Lakshmi, a low caste agricultural labourer, experiences sexual exploitation with no voice that will be heard, no economic exit, no narrative resolution except frozen entrapment. Vidya, presumably upper-caste professional, commands institutional resources, police cooperation, and narrative authority to



gender-based wage gaps remain, and unpaid domestic labour by women continues to subsidize capitalism. *Fire's* queer-affirmative ending had to face violent protests in real time, suggesting that such portrayals threaten patriarchal order. *Thappad* sparked a national conversation about minimizing domestic violence, indicating that cinema can shift discourse. Yet *The Great Indian Kitchen's* cyclical ending acknowledges cinema's powerlessness to transform established structures. Perhaps representation serves as an ideological contest that forces one to think of alternative gender relations, preparing the ground for transformation that representation alone cannot achieve.

### Model Dynamics: Agency does not equate to Liberation

The key insight of this model is the relationship between individual agency and structural liberation. The individual agency relates to the character's ability to act, speak up, and decide. The structural liberation refers to dismantling the systems that constrain women. Films can score high on individual agency while their endings state the impossibility of liberation such as in *The Great Indian Kitchen*. Conversely, films with constrained individual agency can expose structures more effectively as in *Ankur*.

This creates four quadrants (see figure 1).

1. *High Individual Agency / Low Structural Critique,*
2. *Low Individual Agency / High Structural Critique,*
3. *High Individual Agency / High Structural Critique,*
4. *Low Individual Agency / Low Structural Critique.*

This conceptual model enables researchers to conduct four key activities:

- a) **Comparative Analysis:** Films can be plotted across the Agency Matrix and compared within/across decades. How does Arth's economic agency compare to Queen's? Both feature independent women, but intersectional filters reveal class differences shaping what independence means.
- b) **Pattern Recognition:** The spiral framework predicts that future cinema will continue oscillating between individual empowerment and structural critique rather than progressing linearly. We might expect next phase to emphasize collective resistance rather than individual escape.
- c) **Gap Identification:** The model reveals underrepresented intersectional positions such as lower-caste women, or women from different religions, or transgender narratives. The model shows these aren't missing data but structural absences

reflecting select categories whose stories get told.

- d) **Evaluative Framework:** Rather than asking whether this is a feminist film, the model questions the dimensions of agency it represents, through which intersectional filters, and at which stage of the spiral?

This conceptual model risks stating the four dimensions as exhaustive. Other elements such as sexuality, motherhood, age, and beauty standards also merit inclusion. Despite its limitations, this model provides systematic framework for analyzing representational evolution while illustrating the relevance of nuances such as intersectional specificity and the agency/liberation distinction.

### THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The conceptual model proposed in this study advances three theoretical contributions to feminist film studies. First, it replaces binary representation depicting either positive or negative frameworks, with multi-dimensional assessment recognizing that high agency on one dimension such as narrative centrality, may coexist with constraint on others such as economic dependency. Second, it theorizes intersectionality not as additive, for instance gender plus caste plus class, but as constitutive, where caste does not modify gender oppression but determines whether it is structurally possible. Third, the spiral framework proposed in this study, offers an alternative to both progressive narratives and pessimistic cycles which claim nothing changes. It accounts for simultaneous transformation and persistence, expanding possibilities alongside constraints.

### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The first limitation of this study is its interpretive methodology, while enables rich textual analysis, introduces inherent subjectivity. Different researchers might reach different conclusions. The findings thus represent one interpretation rather than objective truth about these films. The interpretative critique used in this study means that the findings reflect the researcher's position on the subject. We suggest that audiences be studied using surveys and focus groups and thus bridge the gap between textual analysis and social impact.

Second, this study's focus on narrative softens other cinematic elements such as cinematography and sound, that also contribute to the meaning. Future scholars may conduct a comprehensive approach incorporating visual and sonic analysis, which would enrich these findings.

Third, reliance on films that were available, excludes those that were inaccessible or lost, potentially biasing the sample toward commercially successful or critically acclaimed works. Purposive sampling of

twenty-one films does not represent Indian cinema's full diversity and some other films offering radical gender representations may be overlooked.

Fourth, the heavy weighing toward Hindi/Bollywood cinema underrepresents Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Bengali, and Marathi cinema, risking the presentation of "Indian cinema" when primarily analyzing North Indian, upper-caste narratives. We recommend that future scholars may conduct a comparative analysis across regional cinemas, which may reveal India's cinematic diversity.

Finally, the study's focus on feature films excludes documentary, experimental, and short-form cinema where feminist filmmaking often thrives outside commercial constraints. We recommend that future scholars may examine other forms of cinema to validate these findings.

## CONCLUSION

This eight-decade analysis of women's narrative agency in Indian cinema reveals a complex spiral of representational evolution, with recursive engagement with feminist concerns that returns to structural critique. Women portrayals have moved from narrative margins to the centre, from supporting roles in men's stories to commanding protagonists across all genres. The shift from the sanctified suffering in *Mother India* to the legitimized refusal in *Thappad* reflects a transformation in what cinema validates as acceptable female choice.

Yet even the contemporary films such as *The Great Indian Kitchen* acknowledge the limits of representation. Women's on-screen agency, even though it may succeed, does not dismantle off-screen patriarchal structures. The cyclical ending, where one woman escapes but another enters servitude, reflects this paradox. It can imagine liberation, but cannot produce it materially.

The findings demand intersectional specificity in future research. Claims about women in Indian cinema often universalize upper-caste, middle-class, urban experiences while marginalizing lower-caste, working-class, and regional narratives. Economic agency proves necessary but insufficient without accompanying structural transformation.

Finally, these eighty years demonstrate the dual function of cinema, as a utopian space rehearsing alternative gender relations and as a tool exposing persistent inequality. Representation shapes discourse, challenges norms, provokes backlash, but individual agency on screen requires a collaborative organization off screen, if it has to transform the structures that constrain possible futures of women.

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