



Review Article


Feminism in Indian Cinema: A Study of Characters in Kiran Rao's Laapataa Ladies

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| Abstract | Manuscript Information |
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| <p>Indian cinema's portrayal of women has been a fascinating metamorphosis. Early films offered idealized housewives and paragons of virtue within the domestic sphere. Romantic narratives often relegated women to the role of damsels in distress, rescued by valiant heroes. However, the winds of feminism have begun to reshape this landscape. Feminist film theory, which critiques how women are represented on screen, provides a valuable lens to analyze these shifts. This study delves into Kiran Rao's "Laapataa Ladies" (2024) through this very lens. Employing a film analysis methodology, we will dissect the film's portrayal of female characters, particularly focusing on how they challenge or reinforce traditional stereotypes. By examining their agency, desires, and struggles within the narrative, we can glean valuable insights into the evolving conversation about gender representation in contemporary Indian cinema.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 18-10-2024 ▪ Accepted: 19-11-2024 ▪ Published: 27-12-2024 ▪ IJCRM:3(6); 2024: 206-209 ▪ ©2024, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes |
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1. INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema, a vibrant tapestry woven with song, dance, and drama, has mirrored the evolving social landscape of the nation. However, the portrayal of women on screen has undergone a dramatic shift, transitioning from objectified figures to individuals with agency and depth. This essay explores the historical trajectory of women in Indian cinema, highlighting the rise of feminism and its impact on their representation. The early days of Indian cinema were marked by a male-dominated landscape. Silent films rarely featured women, and when they

did, they were often portrayed by men due to societal restrictions on female performers. The advent of sound in the 1930s introduced actresses like Devika Rani and Suraiya. These early stars embodied the image of the ideal Indian woman – beautiful, docile, and devoted to family. While these roles celebrated feminine beauty, they reinforced patriarchal structures, restricting female characters to domestic spheres. The following decades witnessed the rise of the "social film," a genre that placed women at the centre of narratives. However, their roles remained largely stereotypical. Films like Mother India (1957)

showcased the "sacrificing mother," willing to endure hardship for her family. Countless romances featured the "damsel in distress," constantly needing rescue from male heroes. The "vamp," a seductive and ultimately villainous character, also became a recurring trope. These portrayals, though featuring female characters, pigeonholed them into predictable and limiting roles. However, seeds of change were being sown. The rise of feminism in the 19th and early 20th centuries began to influence Indian society, and these social shifts found echoes in cinema. Pioneering reformers like Savitribai Phule and Tarabai Shinde advocated for women's education and challenged traditional gender roles. These ideas, along with the influence of Western feminist movements, sparked a growing awareness of gender inequality. The 1970s marked a turning point with the emergence of Parallel Cinema. This movement, spearheaded by directors like Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, challenged mainstream narratives and offered a more realistic portrayal of human experiences, including those of women. Films like *Arth* (1982) delved into themes of female sexuality, desire, and independence, sparking public discourse about gender inequality. Actresses like Shabana Azmi and Smita Patil became powerful carriers of these changing narratives. Their raw performances gave voice to previously unheard female perspectives, unsettling traditional notions of womanhood. While Parallel Cinema provided a platform for feminist thought, mainstream cinema also began to reflect these changes. The late 20th and early 21st centuries saw a diversification of female characters. Actresses like Madhuri Dixit and Kajol embodied the "commercial heroine" – strong, independent women who could fight for themselves while still retaining their femininity. Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) featured strong female leads who challenged societal expectations, albeit within the constraints of romantic narratives. Today, Indian cinema offers a more vibrant and nuanced portrayal of women. We see the rise of the "woman-centric film" which places women's stories at the forefront. Films like *Queen* (2014) and *English Vinglish* (2012) explore self-discovery and female empowerment, challenging the notion that women's fulfilment needs to be tied to men. Actresses like Deepika Padukone and Priyanka Chopra are not just glamorous stars but also producers, activists, and role models who advocate for social change. The journey towards gender parity in Indian cinema is ongoing. Representation remains challenging, with actresses of colour and those outside conventional beauty standards often struggling to find roles. Additionally, the male gaze continues to be an issue, with some films still objectifying women. However, the trajectory is clear. Feminism has left an undeniable mark on Indian cinema, ensuring a wider spectrum of female characters and narratives reflecting modern womanhood's complexities. As Indian cinema continues to evolve, so will its representation of women, offering a more truthful and inclusive portrayal of their lives and experiences. This research paper analyzes the film *"Laapataa Ladies"* (2024) directed by Kiran Rao through the lens of feminist film theory, exploring its portrayal of female characters and its contribution to feminist discourse in Indian cinema.

2. OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze how *"Laapataa Ladies"* utilizes feminist film theory concepts to portray its female characters.
2. To compare and contrast the representation of female characters in *"Laapataa Ladies"* with earlier portrayals in mainstream Indian cinema.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist film theory views cinema as a cultural force that reflects and reinforces societal ideas about women and men. Representation and how audiences engage with films (spectatorship) are central themes. Early critiques, like those by Haskell (1973/1987) and Rosen (1973), targeted stereotypical portrayals of women, particularly in Hollywood films. These repetitive images were seen as harmful distortions that negatively impacted female viewers. Initially, the focus was on promoting positive portrayals of women. However, the concept of positive images alone wasn't enough to challenge underlying structures. Feminist critics turned to theories like semiotics and psychoanalysis to understand the pervasive power of patriarchal imagery in films. For a period, psychoanalysis became the dominant lens.

Semiotics and the Myth of Woman

Claire Johnston (1973/1991) used a semiotic approach to critique stereotypes. She viewed classic cinema as constructing an ideological image of women. Analyzing "woman" as a sign (symbol), Johnston argued it represents the meaning men assign to women. Women themselves are absent, defined as "not-man." This highlights a shift from seeing cinema as a reflection of reality to understanding it as actively constructing a specific, ideological view. Classic cinema hides its production process, making its constructed images of women seem natural and appealing.

Psychoanalysis and the Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking work (*"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"* 1975/1989) used psychoanalysis to understand Hollywood's fascination. She linked it to scopophilia (pleasure in looking), a fundamental Freudian drive. Classic cinema, Mulvey argues, fuels this desire to look by integrating voyeurism and narcissism into narratives and visuals.

Voyeuristic pleasure comes from viewing another (character or situation) as an object. Narcissistic pleasure comes from identifying with the image on screen. Mulvey analyzes how scopophilia functions in classic cinema through a gendered binary of activity and passivity. The male character is active and powerful, driving the narrative and directing the look. The female character is passive and powerless, the object of male desire. Cinema, according to Mulvey, has perfected a visual system catering to the male gaze, aligning with traditions of Western art and aesthetics. She exposes how narrative and visual techniques in cinema make voyeurism a male prerogative. Male characters gaze at female characters, and the audience is positioned to identify with this male perspective. This creates

three layers of the cinematic gaze (camera, character, spectator) that objectify the female character.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper analyses the plot and characters of the 2024 film, *Laapataa Ladies*, directed by Kiran Rao. *Laapataa Ladies* is a comedic drama set in the fictional Nirmal Pradesh, India, in the year 2001. The story revolves around the misadventures of two young brides, Phool and Jaya, whose lives become entangled due to a series of unexpected events. The film begins with the introduction of Deepak, a kind-hearted farmer, and his new bride, Phool, a shy and traditional woman. They, along with several other newlywed couples, embark on a train journey to their respective villages. The brides are all veiled, adhering to traditional customs. A chaotic scene ensues as the train reaches its destination, with passengers rushing to disembark. In the ensuing confusion, Deepak mistakenly boards the wrong compartment and ends up taking Jaya, another veiled bride, with him. Meanwhile, Phool is left behind with Pradeep, Jaya's intended husband. Phool, now in an unfamiliar environment, grapples with the challenges of adapting to her new family and their expectations. She gradually finds her voice and begins to assert herself. Deepak, though initially surprised by the mix-up, is supportive and kind towards Phool. Jaya, on the other hand, finds herself in a situation that contradicts her aspirations for independence. Trapped in a marriage she didn't choose, she begins to explore ways to escape her new reality. Her character arc showcases her resilience and determination as she navigates a patriarchal society. The film introduces supporting characters who play pivotal roles in the narrative. Manju, a strong-willed tea stall owner, becomes a mentor figure for both Phool and Jaya. Shyam Manohar, a police officer with a complex personality, enters the scene as the search for the missing brides intensifies. As the plot unfolds, the two brides embark on their own journeys of self-discovery. They face challenges, form unexpected bonds, and ultimately find strength within themselves. The film explores themes of identity, womanhood, and the complexities of rural Indian life. The climax involves a series of events that bring Phool and Jaya back together. The film concludes with a hopeful message about friendship, resilience, and the power of human connection, leaving the audience with a sense of optimism and satisfaction. "*Laapataa Ladies*" offers a blend of humor, drama, and social commentary, making it a captivating and thought-provoking cinematic experience.

4. OBSERVATION

1. Characterization in *Laapataa Ladies*

Laapataa Ladies explores feminist themes through its characters. Phool, initially shy, gains confidence and defies the housewife stereotype by working at a tea stall. Jaya, the runaway bride, challenges societal pressure by prioritizing education and refusing an arranged marriage. Deepak, the progressive farmer, breaks traditional masculinity by supporting Jaya's dreams. Manju, the strong-willed tea stall owner, embodies female agency, having escaped an abusive marriage. Even Shyam Manohar, the flawed police officer, demonstrates a complex

character with a sense of fairness, evolving from greed to seeking justice.

| Character | Description | Feminist Lens Analysis | Evidence |
|---------------|--|--|---|
| Phool | Young bride, initially shy and unsure | Subverts the housewife stereotype. Gains confidence, speaks her mind, and advocates for herself. | Starts working at the tea stall after being left alone. |
| Jaya | Runaway bride, intelligent and ambitious | Defies societal pressure to marry. Values education and carves her path. | Escape from train, refusal of arranged marriage. |
| | | Prioritizes education and self-fulfilment. Expands the definition of womanhood. | Conversations with her family about studying. |
| Deepak | Farmer, progressive, and kind | Challenging traditional masculinity. Supports Jaya's dreams and individuality. | Rolling his eyes at dowry jokes. |
| | | Represents a modern man who values equality. | |
| Yashoda | Deepak's mother | Supportive and welcoming towards Jaya. | Developing a bond with Jaya. |
| Poonam | Deepak's sister-in-law | Supportive and welcoming towards Jaya. | Developing a bond with Jaya. |
| Manju | Tea stall owner, strong-willed and independent | Represents female agency and resilience. Escaped an abusive marriage. | Running her own business, sharing her story of leaving an abusive marriage. |
| Shyam Manohar | Police officer, flawed but upholds justice | A complex character with a sense of fairness. | Initially driven by greed, eventually seeks justice. |

2. Comparison of Portrayal of Characters in *Laapataa Ladies* and other Hindi Movies post-2018

Bollywood, the quintessential representation of Indian cinema, has undergone a significant evolution in its portrayal of women in recent years. While the industry has historically been criticized for its stereotypical and often objectifying depictions of female characters, a discernible shift has occurred since 2018.

The post-2018 era has witnessed a surge in films that challenge traditional gender roles and offer more complex, multifaceted female protagonists. Women are no longer confined to the archetypal roles of the damsel in distress, the devoted wife, or the glamorous object of desire. Instead, they are portrayed as strong, independent individuals who navigate complex challenges and make their own choices.

Films like "*Raazi*" (2018) and "*Mardaani 2*" (2019) exemplify this shift. These movies feature female protagonists in traditionally male-dominated roles, challenging gender stereotypes and inspiring audiences. Characters like Sehmat Ali in "*Raazi*" and DCP Shivani Shivaji Roy in "*Mardaani 2*" are not just action heroes but complex individuals who embody strength, resilience, and patriotism.

Furthermore, films like "*Thappad*" (2020) have delved into sensitive issues such as domestic violence, shedding light on the realities faced by women in Indian society. The portrayal of women as survivors and fighters has resonated with audiences, sparking important conversations about gender equality and women's rights.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the journey towards complete gender parity in Bollywood is still ongoing. While there has been progress, challenges persist. The industry continues to grapple with issues such as the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles, the prevalence of objectification in certain genres, and the limited diversity in the

portrayal of female characters. Nevertheless, the positive strides made in recent years are undeniable. The emergence of strong, complex female characters in Bollywood is a significant step towards a more inclusive and representative cinema. As the industry continues to evolve, it is hoped that the portrayal of women will continue to deepen, challenging stereotypes and inspiring audiences. While there is still room for improvement, the post-2018 landscape of Bollywood offers a glimmer of hope for a future where women are portrayed with authenticity, complexity, and agency. While the post-2018 landscape of Bollywood has witnessed a commendable shift towards more complex and empowered female characters, films like "Laapataa Ladies" further contribute to this evolution. This film stands out by offering a nuanced portrayal of women navigating challenges in a patriarchal society. Unlike many earlier films that often-reduced women to stereotypes, "Laapataa Ladies" presents complex and relatable characters. Phool and Jaya, the central protagonists, defy traditional expectations. Phool, initially portrayed as a shy and submissive woman, undergoes a transformative journey, eventually finding her voice and independence. Jaya, on the other hand, is a more assertive character who challenges societal norms. The film's strength lies in its ability to showcase the diversity of female experiences. It avoids the oversimplification often found in earlier portrayals, presenting women with both strengths and vulnerabilities. Moreover, the supporting characters, such as Manju, the tea stall owner, contribute to the film's feminist perspective by showcasing women in roles that are often overlooked in mainstream cinema. While "Laapataa Ladies" might not possess the same level of overt activism as films like "Thappad," it subtly challenges gender norms and offers a refreshing take on female characters. By combining humor with thoughtful storytelling, the film effectively engages the audience and promotes a more progressive outlook on womanhood. In conclusion, "Laapataa Ladies" aligns with the broader trend of empowering female representation in post-2018 Bollywood. It offers a nuanced and relatable portrayal of women, contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and challenging traditional stereotypes. By showcasing the complexities of female characters and their journeys, the film reinforces the positive trajectory of women's representation in Indian cinema.

5. CONCLUSION

Laapataa Ladies offers a refreshing departure from traditional Bollywood portrayals of women. The film challenges stereotypes by presenting complex, multi-dimensional female characters. Phool and Jaya, the protagonists, embody distinct facets of womanhood, showcasing the diversity of female experiences. Unlike earlier films that often reduced women to passive roles, these characters actively shape their narratives. The film's exploration of themes like female friendship, agency, and resilience aligns with the broader feminist discourse. By subverting expectations and offering a nuanced understanding of women's lives, "Laapataa Ladies" contributes significantly to the evolving landscape of female representation in Indian cinema. It

is a testament to the industry's growing maturity in depicting women with authenticity and depth.

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