

# Voices Beyond Silence: Portrayals of Women's Resilience in Indian Cinema

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## **Abstract**

*Indian cinema has historically reflected and reinforced patriarchal values by portraying women in limited roles such as obedient wives, self-sacrificing mothers, or objects of desire. These representations often associated femininity with silence, morality, and domesticity. However, contemporary Indian cinema has increasingly begun to challenge these conventional portrayals by presenting women as resilient individuals who resist oppression and assert their agency. This paper examines the changing representation of women through the lens of feminist and intersectional theories. The study analyses selected films including *Bandit Queen* (1996), *Gulab Gang* (2014), *The Kerala Story* (2023), *Manikarnika* (2019), *Padmaavat* (2018), *Raazi* (2018), *Darlings* (2022), *Laapataa Ladies* (2023), *Secret Superstar* (2017), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021). These films portray women negotiating social structures shaped by caste, class, religion, domestic violence, and cultural expectations. The paper explores how gender intersects with other social identities to influence women's experiences and cinematic representation. For instance, *Bandit Queen* depicts Phoolan Devi's journey from victimization to resistance, highlighting caste and gender oppression, while *The Great Indian Kitchen* critiques the invisible burden of domestic labour and patriarchal control within the household. Similarly, films like *Darlings* and *Raazi* use innovative narrative techniques and genre blending to question traditional gender norms and foreground female agency. The study argues that these films function as forms of feminist expression by giving visibility to women's struggles, resilience, and resistance. Through symbolic imagery, silence, dialogue, and narrative disruption, Indian cinema emerges as a significant cultural space that not only reflects social realities but also challenges inequality and promotes feminist consciousness and gender justice.*

**Keywords:** *Women's resilience, Indian cinema, Gender narratives, Feminist film theory*

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## **I. Introduction**

Cinema has always occupied a significant place in Indian society as a powerful medium of cultural expression, social reflection, and ideological transmission. In a country marked by diverse languages, religions, castes, and traditions, Indian cinema functions not merely as entertainment but also as an influential institution that shapes public perceptions, values, and social attitudes. Among the many themes represented in Indian films, the portrayal of women remains one of the most critical areas of discussion within feminist and cultural studies. For decades, mainstream Indian cinema largely depicted women within restrictive patriarchal frameworks, assigning them stereotypical roles such as the devoted wife, sacrificial mother, obedient daughter, or romantic object. These representations reinforced traditional gender hierarchies by presenting women as passive, emotionally dependent, and confined to domestic spaces. Such cinematic portrayals often normalized gender inequality and strengthened societal expectations surrounding femininity, morality, and obedience.

However, with changing socio-political conditions, increased feminist awareness, and the emergence of alternative cinematic voices, Indian cinema has gradually begun to challenge these conventional representations. Contemporary films increasingly foreground women's experiences, struggles, and acts of resistance against oppressive social structures. Women are no longer portrayed solely as silent sufferers but as individuals capable of resilience, self-expression, and transformation. This shift reflects broader feminist discourses that seek to interrogate systems of patriarchy and recover women's voices from historical marginalization. In this context, cinema becomes an important site where questions of gender identity, power relations, trauma, resistance, and empowerment are critically negotiated.

The present study examines the evolving representation of women in Indian cinema through feminist and intersectional perspectives. The concept of resilience in this study refers to women's ability to endure, resist, and transform oppressive circumstances shaped by social, cultural, political, and economic forces. Rather than presenting resilience as mere endurance, the study interprets it as an active process of negotiation and resistance against patriarchal domination. The selected films portray women confronting diverse forms of oppression such as domestic violence, caste discrimination, religious control, emotional abuse, social exclusion, and institutionalized patriarchy. Through their narratives, these films challenge dominant ideologies and create space for alternative representations of female identity and agency.

The theoretical framework of the study is primarily grounded in feminist theory, particularly intersectional feminism. Feminist film criticism has long argued that cinema frequently constructs women through the “male gaze,” a concept popularized by Laura Mulvey, where women are represented as objects of visual pleasure rather than autonomous subjects. Such representations reduce women to passive figures whose identities are shaped according to patriarchal expectations. Intersectional feminism, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, further expands this understanding by emphasizing that women’s experiences cannot be understood through gender alone. Factors such as caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and regional identity intersect with gender to create multiple and layered forms of oppression. In the Indian context, where social hierarchies are deeply embedded within cultural structures, intersectionality becomes particularly relevant for examining cinematic representations of women.

The study analyses selected films including *Bandit Queen* (1996), *Gulab Gang* (2014), *The Kerala Story* (2023), *Manikarnika* (2019), *Padmaavat* (2018), *Raazi* (2018), *Darlings* (2022), *Laapataa Ladies* (2023), *Secret Superstar* (2017), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021). These films belong to different genres and socio-cultural contexts, yet all focus on women negotiating oppressive environments and asserting their agency. *Bandit Queen* presents the life of Phoolan Devi, whose journey from victimhood to resistance exposes the intersections of caste and gender violence. *Gulab Gang* portrays collective female resistance against social injustice, while *Secret Superstar* highlights a young girl’s struggle for identity and artistic freedom within a patriarchal household. Similarly, *The Great Indian Kitchen* critiques the normalization of unpaid domestic labour and the silent oppression experienced by women in everyday family life.

Films such as *Darlings* and *Raazi* employ innovative cinematic techniques to represent women in unconventional roles. *Darlings* addresses domestic abuse through dark comedy and psychological tension, challenging the stereotype of women as helpless victims. *Raazi* portrays a female spy whose courage and intelligence redefine traditional notions of femininity and nationalism. Likewise, *Laapataa Ladies* explores issues of identity, autonomy, and social conditioning through satire and realism. These films collectively demonstrate how contemporary Indian cinema increasingly engages with feminist concerns and seeks to represent women as active participants in shaping their destinies.

Another important aspect of these films is their use of cinematic language and narrative strategies to communicate women’s experiences. Silence, symbolism, visual imagery, and narrative disruption are employed to expose the emotional and psychological dimensions of oppression. In films like *The Great Indian Kitchen*, silence itself becomes a political statement, symbolizing the suppression of women’s voices within patriarchal households. Conversely, acts of rebellion, confrontation, and self-expression signify the reclaiming of agency and identity. Through these representations, cinema emerges as a medium capable of critiquing dominant power structures and generating feminist consciousness among audiences.

This study argues that Indian cinema has evolved into a significant cultural platform for articulating women’s resilience and resistance. While patriarchal stereotypes continue to exist in many mainstream narratives, contemporary films increasingly question social inequalities and offer empowering representations of women. By foregrounding women’s voices and experiences, these films contribute to broader discussions on gender justice, social transformation, and cultural change. Therefore, the study seeks to examine how Indian cinema not only reflects women’s realities but also participates in challenging oppressive ideologies and imagining more inclusive and equitable social futures.

## **II. Objectives**

- To examine the representation of women’s resilience and resistance in selected Indian films through feminist and intersectional perspectives.
- To analyze how Indian cinema challenges patriarchal structures by portraying women’s struggles, agency, and empowerment across diverse social and cultural contexts.

## **III. Research Statement**

The present study investigates the representation of women’s resilience and resistance in selected Indian films through the lens of feminist and intersectional theories. It examines how Indian cinema portrays women negotiating patriarchal oppression shaped by caste, class, religion, domestic violence, and socio-cultural restrictions. The study further explores the ways cinematic narratives, symbols, and visual strategies construct female agency and challenge traditional gender stereotypes. By analysing films such as *Bandit Queen*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Darlings*, *Raazi*, and *Secret Superstar*, the research aims to demonstrate how contemporary Indian cinema functions as a significant cultural space for articulating women’s survival, empowerment, and feminist consciousness.

#### **IV. Review of Literature**

The representation of women in cinema has been a major area of inquiry within feminist cultural studies and film criticism. Scholars have examined how cinema functions as a cultural institution that shapes gender ideologies and reinforces social norms. Early feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey argue that mainstream cinema often constructs women through the concept of the “male gaze,” where female characters are presented as objects of visual pleasure rather than independent subjects. Mulvey’s theory provides a foundational framework for understanding the patriarchal structures embedded in cinematic representation and remains highly relevant in analysing Indian films that objectify or marginalize women.

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, explains how women have historically been constructed as the “Other” within patriarchal societies. Her argument that femininity is socially constructed rather than biologically determined has significantly influenced feminist interpretations of cinema. In the Indian context, scholars have observed that mainstream films frequently portray women in stereotypical roles such as submissive wives, sacrificial mothers, or symbols of honour, thereby reinforcing traditional gender expectations. However, contemporary feminist critics note a gradual shift toward narratives that foreground female agency, resistance, and subjectivity.

Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity further contributes to feminist film analysis by emphasizing that gender is not fixed but socially performed through repeated cultural practices. This perspective is useful in examining how Indian cinema both reproduces and challenges gender norms. Films featuring women who resist patriarchal expectations often destabilize conventional ideas of femininity and open spaces for alternative gender identities. Similarly, bell hooks critiques the absence and marginalization of women, particularly women from oppressed communities, in dominant cultural narratives. Her writings highlight the importance of intersectionality in feminist analysis, stressing that gender oppression intersects with caste, class, race, and other social identities.

The theory of intersectionality developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw is particularly significant for the present study. Crenshaw argues that women experience oppression differently depending on their social location and identity. In Indian society, where caste, religion, and class deeply influence social structures, intersectionality provides an important framework for analysing women’s representation in cinema. Films such as *Bandit Queen* and *The Great Indian Kitchen* illustrate how gender oppression is interconnected with caste hierarchy, domestic labour, and social control. Scholars studying Indian feminist cinema have increasingly focused on these intersecting forms of marginalization to understand the complexity of women’s experiences.

Several studies on Indian cinema have also examined the emergence of women-centric narratives in contemporary films. Researchers argue that recent films increasingly portray women as active agents who challenge patriarchal norms rather than passive victims. For instance, studies on *Raazi*, *Darlings*, and *Secret Superstar* highlight the depiction of women negotiating identity, autonomy, and resistance within oppressive environments. Similarly, feminist readings of *Gulab Gang* and *Manikarnika* interpret these films as narratives of collective female strength and political empowerment.

Scholars such as Shoma Chatterji and Madhu Kishwar have explored the changing representation of women in Indian cinema and the role of films in influencing public consciousness. Their works emphasize that cinema can function both as a tool of patriarchal reinforcement and as a medium of social critique. Contemporary feminist film studies therefore focus not only on representation but also on cinematic techniques such as silence, symbolism, visual imagery, and narrative structure that shape women’s subjectivities on screen.

The existing literature demonstrates that Indian cinema has increasingly become a space for negotiating feminist concerns, resilience, and resistance. However, there remains a need for comprehensive studies that analyse women’s resilience across diverse films and socio-cultural contexts through an intersectional feminist perspective. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how selected Indian films portray women’s survival, agency, and resistance against systemic oppression.

#### **V. Theoretical Framework**

The present study, *Voices of Survival and Women’s Resilience: Projection Through Indian Cinema*, is grounded in feminist film theory and intersectional feminism to examine the representation of women’s resilience, resistance, and agency in selected Indian films. The framework provides a critical lens for understanding how cinema constructs female identities and how women challenge patriarchal structures through cinematic narratives. Since films function as cultural texts that both reflect and shape social ideologies, feminist theoretical perspectives are essential for analysing the portrayal of gender relations in Indian cinema.

The study primarily draws upon feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze.” In her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema represents women as objects of male desire and visual pleasure rather than autonomous subjects (Mulvey 11). According to Mulvey, cinematic techniques such as camera angles, framing, and narrative structure often position women within patriarchal modes of representation, thereby reinforcing gender inequality. This concept is useful

in analysing how traditional Indian cinema frequently confined women to stereotypical roles such as the submissive wife, sacrificial mother, or romantic object. At the same time, contemporary films increasingly challenge these conventions by presenting women as active agents who resist oppression and redefine their identities.

The study also employs Simone de Beauvoir's feminist perspective from *The Second Sex*, where she argues that women are historically constructed as the "Other" within patriarchal society (Beauvoir 26). Beauvoir's theory helps explain how female characters in Indian cinema have traditionally been marginalized and defined in relation to male authority. However, the selected films disrupt this patriarchal framework by portraying women who reject silence and assert their individuality. Characters in films such as *Bandit Queen* and *The Great Indian Kitchen* resist systems of domination and transform personal suffering into acts of resistance and empowerment.

Another significant theoretical component of this study is Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an innate identity but a socially constructed performance shaped by repeated cultural practices (Butler 33). This perspective enables the study to analyse how Indian cinema constructs and challenges normative ideas of femininity. Films like *Darlings*, *Raazi*, and *Laapataa Ladies* question conventional gender roles by portraying women who negotiate identity, autonomy, and resistance beyond patriarchal expectations. Through these narratives, cinema becomes a space where dominant gender norms are destabilized and redefined.

The framework further incorporates Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which examines how gender intersects with caste, class, religion, and other social identities to produce multiple forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1244). Intersectionality is particularly relevant in the Indian context because women's experiences are shaped by deeply embedded socio-cultural hierarchies. For example, *Bandit Queen* highlights the interconnected oppression of caste and gender, while *The Kerala Story* and *Secret Superstar* explore the influence of religion, family control, and social expectations on women's lives. This approach allows the study to move beyond a singular understanding of women's oppression and analyse the complexity of female experiences represented in Indian cinema.

Thus, the theoretical framework combines feminist film theory, existential feminism, gender performativity, and intersectionality to critically examine the selected films. These perspectives collectively help in understanding how Indian cinema both reproduces and challenges patriarchal ideologies while creating spaces for women's resilience, agency, and feminist consciousness.

## **VI. Discussion and Analysis**

Indian cinema has historically functioned as a cultural institution that reflects social values and reinforces dominant ideologies. For decades, women in mainstream Indian films were largely represented within patriarchal frameworks as obedient wives, sacrificial mothers, or romantic figures dependent upon male authority. Such portrayals normalized gender inequality and limited female identity to domesticity and submission. However, contemporary Indian cinema increasingly presents women as resilient individuals capable of resistance, transformation, and self-assertion. The selected films in this study demonstrate how cinematic narratives challenge patriarchal norms and foreground women's survival within oppressive socio-cultural systems. Through feminist and intersectional perspectives, these films reveal the complex realities of women shaped by caste, class, religion, domestic violence, and institutionalized patriarchy.

One of the most powerful representations of resistance is found in *Bandit Queen* (1996), directed by Shekhar Kapur. The film portrays the life of Phoolan Devi, who experiences severe caste discrimination, sexual violence, and social humiliation before transforming into a feared rebel figure. Phoolan's journey reflects Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, where caste and gender oppression intersect to intensify female marginalization (Crenshaw 1244). Unlike traditional cinematic heroines who remain passive victims, Phoolan resists violence through rebellion and retaliation. Her transformation challenges patriarchal notions of feminine weakness and positions her as a symbol of subaltern resistance. The film also disrupts the "male gaze" identified by Laura Mulvey because the narrative emphasizes Phoolan's suffering and anger rather than objectifying her body for visual pleasure (Mulvey 11). Through raw visual imagery and realistic narration, *Bandit Queen* exposes the structural violence imposed upon marginalized women in Indian society.

Likewise, *Gulab Gang* (2014) portrays collective resistance through women who unite against social injustice and male violence. The film moves beyond individual empowerment and emphasizes the significance of female solidarity in challenging patriarchal systems. The women in the film resist oppression through organized action, thereby rejecting traditional portrayals of women as isolated and powerless.

The theme of female empowerment is also central to *Secret Superstar* (2017), which focuses on a young Muslim girl, Insiya, aspiring to become a singer despite patriarchal restrictions imposed by her father. The film highlights how gender oppression intersects with religion, family authority, and economic limitations. Insiya's use of digital platforms to anonymously express her talent symbolizes resistance against silencing mechanisms within conservative social structures. The film emphasizes the importance of reclaiming marginalized voices within

cultural spaces, and *Secret Superstar* reflects this feminist concern by foregrounding a young woman's struggle for self-expression (hooks 45). The support shared between Insia and her mother further demonstrates female solidarity as an important form of resistance against patriarchal control.

Raazi (2018) presents another significant representation of women's resilience through the character of Sehmat, a young woman who becomes a spy during the Indo-Pak war. Unlike conventional depictions of women in nationalist cinema, Sehmat is portrayed as intelligent, emotionally complex, and courageous. Her character disrupts patriarchal assumptions that associate bravery and patriotism primarily with masculinity. While she fulfills familial and national duties, she simultaneously negotiates emotional trauma and moral conflict. The film therefore presents resilience not as physical strength alone but as emotional endurance and ethical struggle. Through Sehmat's character, the narrative redefines femininity by associating women with sacrifice, intelligence, and strategic agency rather than passive dependence.

Similarly, Manikarnika (2019) represents Rani Lakshmbai as a courageous historical figure who combines nationalism with female empowerment. Her portrayal disrupts the conventional image of women confined to domestic spaces and instead presents women as capable political leaders and warriors.

*The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) critiques the invisible oppression experienced by women within domestic spaces. The unnamed female protagonist is confined to repetitive household labour and expected to unquestioningly serve her husband and family. The film portrays patriarchy not through physical violence alone but through everyday practices that normalize female subordination. Silence becomes a powerful cinematic device in the film. The absence of dramatic confrontation reflects how women's suffering is often ignored and internalized within patriarchal households. Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women are historically constructed as the "Other" is evident here, as the protagonist's identity is reduced solely to domestic service (Beauvoir 26). However, her eventual act of leaving the household becomes an assertion of agency and self-respect. The film transforms ordinary domestic routines into political commentary, exposing how unpaid labour and gendered expectations restrict women's autonomy.

In *Darlings* (2022), the issue of domestic violence is represented through an unconventional blend of dark comedy and psychological drama. The protagonist, Badru, initially tolerates abuse from her husband due to emotional dependence and societal pressure. However, the narrative gradually shifts from victimhood to resistance as she confronts her abusive relationship. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is relevant in understanding how Badru rejects the socially conditioned expectation that women must silently endure suffering (Butler 33). By combining humour with trauma, the film destabilizes stereotypical portrayals of abused women and introduces feminist critique within a mainstream cinematic format. The reversal of power dynamics in the narrativizes the reclaiming of female agency and challenges patriarchal authority within marriage.

Another notable film, *Laapataa Ladies* (2023), critiques patriarchal social conditioning through humour and satire. The mistaken identities of the female protagonists become symbolic of women's lack of individuality within patriarchal societies where their identities are often defined through marriage and male authority. As the narrative progresses, the women begin to recognize their own desires and aspirations, thereby reclaiming autonomy. The film subtly exposes how social customs and gender expectations suppress women's individuality while simultaneously offering hopeful possibilities for empowerment and change.

The selected films collectively demonstrate that contemporary Indian cinema increasingly engages with feminist discourse by representing women as active subjects rather than passive objects. Cinematic techniques such as silence, symbolism, close-up imagery, and narrative disruption play crucial roles in constructing women's experiences. In films like *The Great Indian Kitchen*, repetitive domestic visuals symbolize the monotony of patriarchal oppression, while in *Bandit Queen*, violent realism reflects the brutality of caste and gender hierarchies. These cinematic strategies deepen the emotional and political impact of the narratives.

Furthermore, the films challenge the patriarchal ideology that women's virtue lies in silence and endurance. Instead, resistance is portrayed through rebellion, self-expression, emotional confrontation, and collective action. Whether through Phoolan Devi's violent retaliation, Badru's refusal to tolerate abuse, or Insia's pursuit of artistic freedom, the female protagonists reject passive victimhood and assert their agency. The films therefore function as forms of feminist praxis that not only reflect women's lived realities but also critique structural inequalities embedded within Indian society.

## VII. Conclusion

The study *Voices of Survival and Women's Resilience: Projection Through Indian Cinema* examines how contemporary Indian cinema has increasingly transformed the representation of women from passive and marginalized figures into active agents of resistance, resilience, and empowerment. Through the analysis of selected films such as *Bandit Queen*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Darlings*, *Raazi*, *Secret Superstar*, *Gulab Gang*, *Manikarnika*, and *Laapataa Ladies*, the research highlights the ways in which cinema reflects and challenges patriarchal structures deeply embedded within Indian society. These films collectively demonstrate that women's

experiences are not singular or uniform but are shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, class, religion, domestic oppression, and cultural expectations.

The study reveals that contemporary Indian cinema increasingly functions as a space for feminist expression and social critique. Unlike traditional cinematic narratives that confined women to stereotypical roles of sacrifice, silence, and obedience, the selected films foreground women's voices, struggles, and acts of defiance. Female characters are portrayed not merely as victims of oppression but as individuals capable of confronting violence, reclaiming identity, and transforming their circumstances. The representation of resilience in these films moves beyond passive endurance and instead emphasizes resistance, self-awareness, emotional strength, and collective solidarity.

The application of feminist and intersectional theories further demonstrates how cinematic representations challenge dominant patriarchal ideologies. Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" helps reveal the shift from objectified portrayals of women toward narratives that prioritize female subjectivity and agency. Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality highlights how women's oppression is interconnected with broader social hierarchies such as caste, religion, and class. The selected films effectively illustrate these layered realities, particularly in narratives like *Bandit Queen* and *The Great Indian Kitchen*, where personal trauma becomes a reflection of structural inequality. Moreover, the study identifies the importance of cinematic techniques such as silence, symbolism, realism, and narrative disruption in representing women's emotional and psychological experiences. These artistic strategies deepen the political and feminist significance of the films by exposing the everyday realities of oppression and resistance. Through these representations, Indian cinema emerges not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a cultural platform capable of shaping public consciousness and encouraging critical reflection on gender injustice.

The research establishes that contemporary Indian cinema plays a significant role in amplifying women's voices and reimagining female identity within a patriarchal society. By portraying women as resilient and empowered individuals, these films contribute to broader discussions on gender equality, social justice, and feminist consciousness. The study therefore affirms that cinema possesses the potential to challenge oppressive ideologies and inspire more inclusive and equitable social transformation.

In conclusion, the selected films reveal a significant transformation in the representation of women in Indian cinema. While patriarchal stereotypes continue to exist, contemporary filmmakers increasingly foreground women's resilience, trauma, resistance, and empowerment. By incorporating feminist and intersectional perspectives, these films challenge dominant social ideologies and create spaces for alternative representations of femininity. Indian cinema thus emerges as a powerful medium for questioning gender inequality, amplifying women's voices, and imagining more inclusive and equitable social realities.

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