



Research Paper

THE DYNAMICS OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN ACTION SEQUENCES OF CONTEMPORARY HINDI CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Violence and action sequences in films have, for a long period, been associated with men performing them. This paper looks at the politics of representation of violence performed by women in the three film texts, including Naam Shabana (2017), Akira (2016) and Dhaakad (2022). It aims at understanding the power play and implications in the action scene and the socio-cultural stance of women. With the notion that the films are created and viewed inside a society that is firmly rooted in male-dominated stereotypes, this paper aims to review these films about women in contemporary times that seek to get revenge without being idolised as a goddess. So the portrayal of women in action scenes needs closer analysis. The paper is analysed using the framework of rape and revenge and performativity by Lalitha Gopalan and Judith Butler, respectively, to answer how the fight sequences involving women are portrayed, why the portrayal is implemented in such a manner, what it connotes, and thus, what the power equation and socio-cultural relation it suggests. Thus, it looks at how violence performed by women in a way just strengthens patriarchy due to the body language shown to be masculine and stunts performed being less dangerous in nature.

Keywords: *Women, Violence, Hindi Cinema, Performativity, Revenge, Stunts*

INTRODUCTION

Being the world's largest producer of films, Hindi cinema and India's social and political history have always been closely related. Hindi cinema has contributed significantly to the construction of several dichotomies, including tradition and modernity, Indian and Western, and spiritual and material, within the backdrop of India's nationalist movement. Bollywood storylines have contributed to the conversation about women's roles and positions in Indian society by struggling with these boundaries. Action genres gained immense popularity as they catered to the patriarchal society, which promoted the portrayal of men as supreme as they are very strong and capable of fighting the bad single-handedly. Women were not allowed to act in Indian films when they first came out. Thus, male artists also used to take on the roles of women. Women's entry into the film industry redefined the significance of women in films, transforming the face of Indian cinema. Due to their vast appeal, Indian history and mythology were previously used as an influence for the works. It dramatised male fantasies about the feminine and primarily reflected the interests and viewpoints of masculine bias. Although women have historically played important roles in Indian society, it is unclear if these responsibilities were truly important or were merely used to reinforce stereotypes and uphold a patriarchal system.

A majority of the general public has the opinion that watching violent or graphically violent films makes people less likely to perform violent acts in real life. This has led to the fact that, in certain circumstances, it has prompted censorship, while in others, it has caused regulation. However, for some viewers, it is said to be cathartic in nature. This strengthens the argument for action films existing as a genre. The genre, on the other hand, typically portrays a so-called versatile hero who is battling against tremendous challenges, such as deadly circumstances, an evil and dangerous villain or is on a pursuit that typically results in the protagonist's/hero's victory and appears to be resembling the spheres of action proposed by Vladimir Propp.

Over the years, the woman's boldness, valour and modernity in the film have served as a barometer for the nation's greatness and modernity. With the economic pressures intervening, the Indian Public sphere was crucially refashioned and thus, even Indian cinema addressed and shaped it. In contemporary times, women are starring in bold blockbusters, narrating untold stories of women and catching attention through their bold stunts and movements in their performance, questioning the stereotypes of a woman's role in a film. In earlier action genres, women were rarely performing stunts. Even the stunts performed portrayed women as fighting with swords as queens and had a historical and mythological touch. However, in recent times, women are shown in fiction films performing stunts casually without such a setting, making use of other kinds of weapons.

RATIONALE

The texts chosen for analysis include choreographed fight scenes from films that have at least two to three major action scenes with women performing them. The films chosen for the research are Tapasee Pannu starrer Naam Shabana(2017), directed by Shivam Nair, Sonakshi Sinha starrer Akira(2016), directed by A.R. Murugadoss and Kangana Ranaut starrer Dhaakad(2022), directed by Razneesh Ghai, which acts as the primary source. The reason for the choice of texts is to highlight the action scenes in the film that are not sports films and consist of a minimum of two to three major choreographed fight scenes with different well-established lead actors.

OBJECTIVES

The goal of the research is to analyse the politics in representations of women in chosen action sequences of Hindi films post-2015. The objective of the current study is to provide a comprehensive study of film texts with such scenes and the star construct in relation to the genres. The study has the following sub-objectives:

1. To understand the power play and implications in the action scene in terms of gender

2. To read the Socio-political and cultural stance of women with respect to the scene

LITERATURE REVIEW

Action sequences and women

Even though Valentina Vitali's *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies* informs about the basic premise of the study, it discusses women in action cinema in the 1920s and 30s, which shows the need for the evaluation of the same in contemporary times. The women performed stunts in historicals(Rajput). It also talks about the presence of actions of women in Hindi cinema in the early careers of Durga Khote (Maya Machindra). Women in films were, first and foremost, a powerful marketing device. Their images in action films were mostly in the commercial dimension. The industrial pressure read images of women as commodities. Women performing movements that exceeded or diverged from the prevailing codes of modesty gave the producers something valuable to sell and gave a competitive edge. Films featuring stunts and actions from Fearless Nadia involved the greater visibility of images of real women in the public sphere. The research further attempts to explore the contemporary times that the book has not catered to.

Although the book *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* suggests a framework for comprehending the uniqueness of Indian film as a national cinema, the chapter that deals with Avenging Women clearly talks about the idea of rape and revenge and looks at women in the action genre specifically.

Industry's narrative and engagement

The star cast and other celebrities of the film franchise provide an outlook on how they view the film and their expectations and opinions of it. In an interview with Mid-day newspaper, Sonakshi Sinha, the lead of the film Akira, stated, "For years, we have only had men playing action hero parts. It is high time we change that. The audience has become more accepting now and

is ready to watch experimental stuff. They don't mind watching a woman pummeling goons. Look at our women athletes who brought back medals from the Rio Olympics. There's really nothing girls can't do. (Mid Day 2016)" which acts as a source for study, as it shows how women in action scenes are still considered to be experimental in spite of their existence since the 1920s and 30s. The need to change the stereotypes of how women are portrayed in action scenes of Hindi cinema is observed. Actor Vidyut Jammwal in an interview, seemed to praise Kangana Ranaut's performance in Dhaakad by saying, "When I saw this film, I was very proud that there is a girl who is doing something really great"(Entertainment Desk 2022), which clearly draws attention towards the scantiness of such roles and scenes for women and highlights the idea of a "girl" performing stunts which makes it great. . Tapsee Pannu in an interview with Deccan Chronicle says "When it comes to martial arts, Akshay is the best. I looked up to him for my action sequences. But it is very intimidating to do an action scene with him. I also learnt basic Mixed martial arts (MMA) techniques for this film"(Deccan Chronicle 2017), which clearly shows the need to portray oneself capable enough to match the standards and norms that the industry engages with in association with male action scenes. The male stardom takes the key attention.

Women in Hindi Cinema

Urvashi Butalia's ideas in her work *Woman in Indian Cinema* suggest that commercial Indian cinema is the most effective form of communication, which helps the study in analysing the chosen commercial texts. In order to increase awareness of issues affecting women, including marriage, widowhood, dowry, and rape, many Indian directors have created films about these topics. These actions made it possible for women to appear in more films that dealt with women's issues and made them more prominent on the screen. Only one film out of every 100 that was watched portrayed women as full-fledged human beings, continuing the tradition of portraying women as sex objects and unequal partners (Butalia 1984).

She recommended that Indian films place more of an emphasis on balancing women's image and avoiding stereotypes. Though this study does not act as the foundation, it informs us that very few works highlight women to be bold through performing stunts and cooking outside of the domestic setting, which can help in understanding the politics of representation of women.

To add to this representation of women, it is important to look at how the female body is looked at and the norms set for it. The female body evolved into a crucial component of an actress's popularity throughout the history of Hindi cinema. Their slender frames testify to the time they spend working out in the gym or maintaining a stereotyped body type. Sonu Sharma and Dr Jitendar Singh Narban, in their work *Indian Cinema and Woman*, highlight how filmhood doesn't seem to reflect the shifting social trend in which women are emancipating themselves from taboos and preconceptions. Women are now appearing in more films than ever before, but their roles are now much smaller on the screen. The majority of the time, male counterparts receive unfair favouritism over females from the plot to the end credits. This clearly shows the imbalance between the socio-cultural and political setting and the representation in the films. In this context, actor Kangana Ranaut stated, "Forget the credit; they (male actors) take all the money as well. We don't get paid even one-third of what male actors take home. It's not so much about the money; but it's about (being a) woman." (Zee News 2014). However, even though, in a quiet, steady, and non-confrontational manner, women working in the film industry have been discovered to be powerful forces in changing the face of Indian cinema, they still lack getting different roles showing their true abilities.

To further support the idea of the objectification of women, Uberoi, in her study *Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art*, examines how women are portrayed in popular art in India and notes two distinct processes. Within a larger cultural environment that is both homogenising and hegemonic, the objectification

of women.

She looked at the two main causes of their absence from the media and society. Women have never been able to contribute fully and appropriately to society, on the one hand, due to the patriarchal rhetoric that marginalises them, and on the other, men have always controlled the myths and authorities that give society its legitimacy, while women have been exchanged and possessed in the social relationships between men (Uberoi 1990).

Gender, Performativity and Society

In the opening chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler introduces the concept of performativity by addressing how "gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is alleged to be. Gender is always a doing in this sense, even though it's not a doing by a person who could be considered to have existed before the deed" (Butler 25). This text plays a key role in the study due to its framework on performativity. The study will draw on the idea of performativity in such scenes by the women leads. In order to view a film as a reflection of society, understanding the socio-cultural status of women and its evolution helps the study in tracking the changes observed, if any and its influence on the representation of women in action scenes. Dr Partha Sarathi Mallik traces out the position of women in various eras and the actions society has taken to improve the situation in his work *Socio-Cultural Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective*.

METHODOLOGY

The article will be positioned in the larger framework of gender studies and feminist studies in specific. A qualitative methodology using the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's idea of performativity will be used in the study, along with Lalitha Gopalan's idea of rape and revenge. The need to use a textual analysis is imperative to understand the various aspects involved in the action scene in terms of the shot sizes, angles and stunts performed, among others.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All three primary texts consist of action scenes that take the narrative forward. The film *Dhaakad* starts with an action scene that sets the mood and the tone of the film. It establishes the role of the female lead as superior, with several low-angle shots in the fight that introduce her as an agent who works against human trafficking. A woman's body language is often considered to be "feminine". This is often understood through the lesser usage of what we consider the lateral space of the body. Kangana Ranaut stands up straight with broad shoulders, which is considered masculine, according to body language experts. So, there is a sense of "masculinity" that is tried to be shown to take the female lead seriously and be capable of fighting the goons. But despite that being the attempt, there is an emphasis on femininity by having close-up shots to focus on the feminine area of the body. Erwin Straus discusses the basic importance of lateral space, one of the distinctive spatial dimensions produced by the human upright stance (1966), which understands the idea with the example of throwing, which can also be applied to fight scenes as it majorly tends to understand the body language. The basic difference that Straus observes is that "compared to boys, girls do not fully engage their bodies in motion" (Straus 157). Except for their arms, which are not extended as far as they could be, the girls tend to stay rather still when compared to the boys. Even though the filmmaker and the actress have made efforts to contradict and challenge the body language that is considered to be masculine, with performance and bold stunts and movements, it still is shown as feminine due to the camera angles and the body-hugging clothes.

In the first fighting scene in the film *Akira*, a young girl (who then becomes the female lead of the film) is shown to be getting trained in karate and fighting against acid attackers. She stays in one position and moves limited enough to fight the goons. This particular fight scene witnesses the lead take the role of the attacker with stunts like front leg axe kick and Hapkido, which creates space and helps to push an opponent off-

balance. Women are typically less forthcoming about their bodies than males are in their stance and pace. Typically, a man's stride is longer in proportion to his physique than a woman's stride is in proportion to hers. Is what he argues. So the act becomes gendered through the portrayal of the lead in action scenes in terms of their body language, postures, and camera shots. The girl is portrayed as valorous compared to her friends through the act and her body language, which is a result of her training in Karate, where she is the only girl in the group to learn it. Though all the chosen texts look at violence and have similarities, the stunts, context, and settings are different. So despite it having females as leads, it cannot be looked at as a single identity. Butler claims that it is problematic that it is presumed that the term "women," for instance, refers to a single identity. This is troublesome since it is impossible to identify a common factor among all women because they are so diverse. Similarly, unlike stereotypical representations of women in male-dominated films, characters in films with women in action scenes are completely different. All three characters in each film have different personalities and are driven for their revenge for different reasons.

Every hero in the film, irrespective of his personality, is portrayed as capable of fighting in action scenes, irrespective of not being taught to perform such acts, whereas women have to be trained. These characters undergo training in Martial arts, Karate, and other forms to be able to fight regardless of the role of the opponent. The reason for all three characters to be drawn towards violence and take vengeance starts from their childhood and the trauma associated with what they experienced and witnessed. So unlike men, who are considered to know fighting almost naturally, women have to undergo an incident or a traumatic experience for them to learn the skill and to fight their opponents in these texts. *Akira*, as a young kid, is seen fighting against acid attackers and is even seen training herself in karate. So defending herself and attacking wherever necessary comes off as very natural through repetition. So gender identity can then be understood as it is formed through a set of acts. "Gender proves to be per-

formative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler 1999, 33). The act of fighting and performing stunts which were initially in the attacking end becomes performative in nature as a defence despite being given high levels of sedatives in the film. Kangana Ranaut, in the film *Dhaakad* is trained to fight and use ammunition. She is then aware of her role as an agent in fighting against human traffickers. Whereas when she is searching for Zaira, a little girl, and fights others to find her, it becomes a performative act through repetition. The close-up shots add to the cinematic storytelling during the fight scenes. It shows she is emotional as it focuses eyes filled with tears, highlighting her care towards the child, which supports the idea that the primary role of a woman has been that of a caregiver/taker. This gives an impression of how despite the lead being trained in the skill of fighting, the role of a woman as a caretaker in society cannot be removed from any situation.

It is often understood that men are strong and powerful and thus are often the ones who save women from the villains (who are predominantly seen as the damsel in distress). This adds to the idea of their manliness. In the film *Naam Shabana*, despite Tapasee Pannu being trained and sent to accomplish a mission, it is still Akshay Kumar who is shown to save her in the end. Using a high angle, which often acts as looking down, also shows her helplessness and needing help to defend and save herself. She stands close to her body, showing vulnerability. Women still frequently sit with their legs somewhat close together and their arms crossed over their torso, despite the fact that women now wear trousers more frequently than they once did and, as a result, do not have to be constrained by their clothing as they once did. Men tend to keep their feet more apart when standing or reclining than women do, and women also keep their hands and arms closer to or covering their bodies more frequently, especially when showing vulnerability (Young 142). So when it is Akshay Kumar who saves her, the act then conforms to the expected gender iden-

tity, whereas when it is the female lead who is fighting the goons, it is often understood as a contestation to the gender core. Except for the time she is vulnerable, her body language is viewed to be masculine during the performance of action. “It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in the way” (Butler 1988, 527). This act of Akshay Kumar saving her despite her being considered to be very skilled and capable shows her in need of a man to protect her, as though one can never independently fight and take care of themselves.

COSTUME

Indian films have historically relied heavily on costumes to be successful, particularly historical dramas, biopics, and films that depict lavish Indian weddings. Technology has only served to increase the allure. The character’s attire immediately reveals something to the audience, giving a hint as to what the act will be about and who the character is in relation to the action of the performance.

Unlike the typical “masala films” that portray women in chiffon sarees running around snow-capped mountains, there is a need to represent women as strong and fit like their male counterparts in action films. The leading ladies in these films are shown to be tough through their figure-hugging “Western” clothes, unlike other films that show femininity through other types of clothes and behaviour. There is a sense of toughness that is associated with Western clothing, usually which is made to be seen as valorous. Even if they are wearing Indian clothing, the neckline is deep, and the clothes are tight to enhance and highlight the cleavage and chest area. The idea of sexualizing the female body is very evident.

The fact that these leading ladies in the films wearing Western clothing seems normalized can also be understood as the result of performativity. The repetition of the performed acts is a crucial

component of performativity (Butler 2011, xii). Additionally, Butler compares it to “a ritualised manufacture” (Butler 2011, 60). So with the repeated act of wearing it, our view of Indian women wearing such clothes or instead not wearing sarees or salwar, is made normal, and the view is changing. But despite the act being normalised in Indian society, it is still viewed as progressive and modern, which often makes them look rebellious and courageous. Women in Indian society are appreciated when they have long hair, whereas in these films, the hairstyles are short, which can be understood as an effort to make them look more masculine or progressive.

CONCLUSION

The films have a contemporary touch to them and make real-world connections through the protagonists’ realistic portrayal in these sequences, rather than make-believe; the characters seem more relatable. It would be common to associate the goddess Kaali with vengeful women, yet that is not the case in these texts. The fact that they had prior training to be able to fight in this fashion makes it easier for the viewer to relate to the narrative more engagingly. It does not depict the women in pristine, immaculately kept garments, whether it is in terms of makeup or attire. Instead, it is done in a way that enhances the story by giving it a more realistic look. They are depicted in casual clothing, which fits the situation.

The themes primarily centre on violence and vengeance. The majority of the violence is perpetrated by the protagonist because it is typically motivated by retaliation, which is viewed as an act of attack. The intolerance for injustice is what is shown symbolically. It is a battle against social injustices in society, not only the adversary. The use of violence in these films also serves as evidence that one can prevail in battle. Despite a few male characters controlling the female leads, *Dhaakad*’s conclusion demonstrates true independence, and *Akira* makes a sacrifice for the sake of society, leading to a win. As a result, women’s use of violence turns into a strategy for obtaining

their goals. The tactics used to represent power go through a constant conflict, with the climax of the fight portraying power in the hands of the women protagonists in all three texts, with the use of appropriate camera angles.

The portrayal seems to be implemented in such a manner to reiterate the idea of how “Women can do anything men can do”, as Manijeh Nasrabadi claims in the title of her paper “Women Can Do Anything Men Can Do: Gender and the Affects of Solidarity in the U.S. Iranian Student Movement, 1961–1979”. This also acts as the agenda behind women performing violence and not men. There is a need to portray women as equivalent to men in terms of performance. However, the violence performed in these texts clearly shows women outdoing men and not just as equivalents in the fight sequences, but it is important to note that they do not really transpose the kind of association made with men. The box office collection plays a crucial role in understanding the same. Unlike some of Rohit Shetty’s films that portray unrealistic and exaggerated action stunts with men, the stunts performed in the chosen texts are less dangerous in nature, which hinders the equalising factor.

Dhaakad sexualises the female body and portrays the woman as flexible in the fight sequences. *Naam Shabana*, towards the final fight, does showcase the need for a male figure to help her. *Akira* portrays her as helpless towards the end of the film despite the fight sequence showing her as a wild attacker who does not stop till she gets her revenge. So, the films bring in the emotional factor that mainstream male action films do not cater to. Therefore, the conventional notion of femininity is portrayed in these texts despite women performing stunts in a valorous and bold manner through the politics of representation, leading to a clear distinction between men and women performing the same, an act of violence.

The selection of these texts allows for a wider area of research because they are performed by different actors from different years and on dif-

ferent subjects. The reasoning is unique to these texts alone and cannot be generalised, which is one of the study's limitations. It simply examines violence in one language of three texts and does not examine historical violence in depth. The article does not include mental or communal violence as well.

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