

## **Blurring the Binaries, Blending the Gender: A Transition from Male Masculinity to Female Androgyny in Hindi Cinema**

SIMRAN PREET KAUR & VANDANA SHARMA  
Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, India

The notion of gender identity as immutable has prompted a renewed focus on the rethinking of issues pertaining to the representation of women in Hindi cinema. The most pronounced effect of reconfiguring gender can be seen through the transformation of women identity in the recent decades because of the restructuring of gender relations that it has arguably initiated. Renewed forms of autonomy and reflexivity as critical awareness of oneself have emerged which no longer take into consideration the dichotomy between male domination and female subordination. Drawing upon the insights of Halberstam and Butler, the paper is an attempt to analyze the deconstruction of gender binaries and re-visioning of female masculinity in the portrayal of celluloid females in the action movies *Gunday* and *Mardaani*. Emerging with all the outstanding traits, the contemporary portrayal of androgynous females is no doubt nuanced and distinctive but the analysis is based on as to whether such exceptional platform provides better representation, and moreover, whether such representations offer inherent multiplicity within the homogeneous classification of femininity with respect to Indian cinema.

Keywords: Gender, autonomy, androgynous, multiplicity

The notion of gender identity as immutable has prompted a renewed focus on the rethinking of issues pertaining to the representation of women in Hindi cinema. Since its inception, Hindi cinema has portrayed women as marginalized identities defined within the domain of patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks, struggling to break free from the shackles of ideological stereotypes which denied their self-hood and identity. Being visualized as ideal mothers, submissive housewives or dependent daughters or as immoral prostitutes, cabaret dancers and strippers; cinema in its early phase has emphasized upon women as having slightest importance. Within the domain of Indian cinema, the notions of male gaze and spectatorship have ever since assisted in passive display of female bodies, fetishism, voyeurism, and the successful subordination of the female to the male gaze. Films ostensibly celebrate women's eroticism while reducing her to a passive sex-object. Feminist approach to Indian cinema began in 1980s with the writings of Maithili Rao, the first film critic in the country who consistently focused upon the representation of women in Hindi cinema. Analyzing the portrayal of women in Indian cinema, Rao in "Images of Women" claims that Indian cinema is,

... so driven by its phallogocentrism that its heroes inevitably acquire longer than life dimension with the archetypal overtones. The heroine is

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Correspondence to: Simran Preet Kaur, Department of Languages and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, SMVD University, Katra-182 320, Jammu & Kashmir, India.  
E-mail: simranpreetsmvdu@gmail.com

strait jacketed into a chaste wife, like the mythical *Sita-Savitri*. Her suffering makes her only more virtuous. She is a nurturing mother either self-effacing or an avenging demon, Durga/Kali or a titillating seductress oozing as a vampish character. (Rao, 1995, p. 241)

The making and presentation of Indian cinema and the extent to which Indian filmmakers have been able to stir up the man-woman relationship depends upon the cultural ethos of the Indian society and its myriad manifestations. Even though Hindi cinema has been churning out stereotype image of gender relations and showing mother-in-law or a sister-in-law as a bully, who are all inadvertently perpetrating patriarchy in a way, yet Hindi cinema has always struggled to describe evil. The Tradition and change feature constantly hand in hand in films. Although, Hindi cinema is a rich repertoire of traditional values and keeps reinventing the socio-cultural ambiance of patriarchy in its films but there does exist a transition in the recent decades wherein female performers have been breaking as well as perpetuating the stereotypes of masculine and feminine, making themselves an emblem of both the set of emotions. In the similar vein, Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) holds the difference that exists between men and women, "the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating" (p. 128). From the perspective of spiritual mentality, Woolf provided a spiritual meaning to androgyny. For her, androgyny aimed at giving males and females, a chance to write without the consciousness of their sex which would further result in uninhibited creativity. Elaborating on this notion, she asks,

If two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with only one? Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than similarities? For we have too much likeness as it is. (p. 1)

Difference should be celebrated but it should exist within the individual androgynous self-fertilizing mind. Keeping with the aforementioned conception, it can be suggested that androgyny can be referred as the capability of an individual of either sex to embody all the human traits, regardless of the cultural connotations which render one as exclusively feminine or exclusively masculine.

Contemporary movies reflect the inherent multiplicity within the seemingly homogeneous category of Indian femininity being projected ever since. Diverging from gender tyranny, the present paper is an attempt to trace the shift from negative objectification of celluloid female towards generative subjectification which here implies a supplement rather than replacement of the gender norms undertaken during the process of subject formation. This reconceptualization of agency in Hindi movies *Gunday* (2014) and *Mardaani* (2014) affirm that gender identity is not immutable and can be challenged. The objective here is to rewrite the portrayal of celluloid females and to examine whether cinema facilitates the subversion of ideology or whether cinematic representations still override the cultural content and ambience.

The most pronounced effect of reconfiguring gender can be seen through the transformation of women identity in the movies emerging in the recent decades because of the restructuring of gender relations that it has arguably initiated. Renewed forms of autonomy and reflexivity as critical awareness of oneself have emerged which no longer take into consideration the dichotomy between male domination and female subordination. The conception of identity as free from confinements has been aptly highlighted by Lois McNay in *Gender and Agency* where she avers,

The concept of agency has been through the idea of embodiment which yields a more open conception of gender identity as a lived set of embodied potentialities, rather than as an externally imposed set of constraining norms. (2000, p. 31)

This idea denotes that body as a transitional entity, is dynamic and mutable threshold where individual's experiences are realized but its incorporation is not certain. This is because of the divergence between the psychological interior and corporal exterior where each is constitutive but irreducible. The lack of adhesiveness between the two suggests that gender identity is never straightforward rather a dynamic whole. The embodied subject, although, is constituted through dominant norms but is not reducible to them. In the echo of this, Butler's idea of "performativity" can help understand the delusion of considering gender as a quasi-permanent structure. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler suggests a move beyond the representation of gender as a one-sided phenomenon of imposition and opposes "... those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were ... false or derivative, and others, true and original (Butler, 1990, p. viii)". If gender is "performative", as argued by Butler, then individuals can perform alternate roles. This is what celluloid females in the recent decades have been doing; performing different roles at different interval of times. Refuting the age old notions of "damsel in distress", "angel in the house", etc, the female protagonists have made the choice of how to be rather than what to be, thereby, creating a dynamically altered social milieu in which females are exposed to alternative, transgressive and ultimately libratory ways to perform gender of their own choice.

### **The Prey as Predator in Indian Cinema: Androgyny or Masquerade**

Hero, the key archetype in Hindi cinema has always been associated with the masculinity within the domain of binary dualism. Owing to the constraint of gender binary, women identity in the past has been associated with fragile character cowering in a corner, emitting piercing shriek waiting for a macho man to rescue her from a bunch of criminals. The ethnicity of hero as always being a male is elaborated by Le Guin in *Earthsea Revisioned* when she avers, "In our hero-tales... heroism has been gendered: The Hero is a man. Women may be good or brave, but with rare exceptions... women are not heroes" (5). Fraught with inherent contradictions is the term "Heroine": woman is never the valiant savior of the humanity from malevolence as she is always seen as burdened with serious tribulations. Man possessing heroism is always perceived as his ultimate accomplishment of masculine destiny.

It is because masculinity is related to "qualities conventionally supposed to belong to man such as physical strength and courage" (Encarta dictionary). However, it can be argued that masculinity has nothing to do with men or male body. The underlying political ideology restricts the power hidden in masculinity to males, thereby constructing powerless females. Judith Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* argues that the "female masculinity are rejected in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing" (1). Rather female masculinity is as real or unreal as male masculinity. Challenging the male monopoly of power and aggression, female masculinity thereby, comprises of female-bodied person expressions that were traditionally being considered as quintessentially masculine. The first stage of female masculinity in Hindi cinema was in form of masquerade and the most significant androgynous image in this area was fearless Nadia. Her aggressive character reflected her being 'masculine' and her romantic appeal suggested her as 'feminine'. Closest

to her representation, Nadira was also an image who perpetuated and sustained the amalgamation of masculine and feminine traits. *Hunterwali* (1935), introduced the genre of stunt films where in female masqueraded as a 'male' but the protagonist also retained her womanhood identity at the same time. Shattering the myth of women's femininity being defended by her coyness, her fragile beauty or her submissive nature; fearless Nadia in almost all her films like *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), *Diamond Queen* (1940), *Bambaiwali* (1941), *Jungle Princess* (1942), *Mukaabla* (1942), *Mauj* (1942), *Hunterwali ki Beti* (1943), *Stunt Queen* (1945), *Himmatwali* (1945), *Tofaani Queen* (1947), *Fighting Queen* (1952), and *Carnival Queen* (1959) was an iconic representation of fighting for good against the evil or the defender of the oppressed. Girish Karnad in "The One is for Nadia" highlights this valiant persona of Nadia as he avers,

The single most memorable sound of my childhood is the clarion call of Hey-y-y as fearless Nadia, regal upon her horse, her hand raised defiantly in the air, rode down upon the bad guys. To us school kids of mid-forties fearless Nadia meant courage, strength, idealism. (86)

The second most prominent actress depicting the fusion of femininity and masculinity was Nadira in *Aan* (1952). In most of their films the female protagonist as male masquerade also enjoyed the status of being a female. It assisted in manipulation of power-reversal symbolized purely from the different way of cross-dressing in male clothes. At times this cross-dressing acted as a protective shield to prevent rapes or sexual harassment. Nargis in *Miss India* (1957), Padmini in *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai* (1960), Vajayantimala in *Ishara* (1964); all females disguised as males were not to reflect gender parity but to opt for the third space of identity as a solution, even if it was temporary and ambiguous.

Moving beyond, masculinity for women changed from being a medium of disguise which offered security towards traits which reflected the qualities like strength and courage, implying the appropriation of male discourse. Male attire not only enhances the aggressiveness of their persona but also gave more power to their body language. Women empowerment, when they were wearing or when not in masquerade could be seen in movies like *Jhansi Ki Raani* (1957), *Pratighaat* (1987), *Shearni* (1988), *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988), *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), *Phool Bhaare Angare* (1991), *Insaaf ki Devi* (1992), *Aanso Bane Angaare* (1993); although the empowerment was in the form of violence but insertion of masquerade was to fracture the male hegemony. Though it did not empower them fully but the fissures that they left exposed the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society. Maithili Rao reveres these women as "lady avengers" and reproaches these films for "being hostile to female sexuality" and for passing themselves off as nothing more than "victimization masquerading as female power" (24). But Rao did not consider the significance of these roles in the evolution of real androgynous characters in Hindi cinema. These films laid the foundation for the women's cinema in real terms where women raise their voice for themselves and others against injustice of patriarchal world and make a complete third space for themselves where they are not different but equal to men. Films such as *Damini* (1993), *Tejasvini* (1994), *Bandit Queen* (1994), *Daman* (2001), *Fiza* (2000), *Dushman* (1998), *Mrityudand* (1997) and *Godmother* (1999) also reflected strong women who acquired moral courage, power and strength to face and fight evil forces on their own. Their masquerade being circumstantial was based on actual life and rejected male clothing as only means to sustain the power structure. The women in them did not need to renounce their position or identity as women in order to try and set the power-equation right.

The third stage illustrated the melding where the new woman was not the stoic and resilient paradigm of feminine virtues but a physically, emotionally and psychologically

androgynous character, unable to derive lasting fulfillment from identification with the stereotyped ideal mothers and wives. From the earlier meek and docile one to the strong, self-reliant and independent one, these female characters promised a totally reconstituted ideological identity. Women in *Lakshya* (2004), *Salaam Namaste* (2005), *Dhoom 2* (2006), *Corporate* (2006), *Tashan* (2008), *Saas Baahu aur Sensex* (2008) were androgynously completed liberated women. Assertive and authoritative, they were clear about their desires and drives.

Although some audacious reflections could be seen in movies like *Sholay* (1975) where in Basanti appears on the screen with a whip in her hand riding her horsewagon or Raveena Tandon in *Daman* (2001) who chooses to accept authority, overcoming the fear of helplessness and domestic violence or Vidya Balan in *Kahaani* (2011) who fights her own battle without the presence of 'omnipotent' male, or Rani Mukerjee in *Mardaani* (2014) projected as the valiant savior of humanity from malevolence or the powerful portrayal of Boxer Mary Kom in *Mary Kom* (2014).

Highlighting these dynamic representations of self-discovery, celluloid females since ages have created a consistent and coherent identity, contributing in the formation of a more nuanced concept of agency. This change which dominates much thought on identity suggests that all gender performances are equally authentic or inauthentic be it performed by a male or a female. Moreover, this constitutes a move, away from females as victim images towards females as active agents, having individuality of their own, which is the hypothesis of the research conducted.

### **Shivani and Nandita: The New *Avatars* of Hindi Cinema**

Interrogating the biological determinism that precludes women from heroism, women in the movies *Mardaani* and *Gunday* are seen as blazing a trail for other women by executing action in their performances. This giant stride in their filmic representations can be seen through the way they embrace the traits of both masculinity and femininity. The perceived damsels in distress enter a new world as a brave new woman claiming that "heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies" (Guin, 1993, p. 2). Existing beyond the realm of strict dictates of biological essentialism, the protagonists in these movies attest to the fact that masculinity is an authentic expression of gender rather than being a fake manifestation of males only. Ostensibly, the title of both the movies, *Gunday*, implicates and connotes to be a patriarchal arena as that ideology constrains ideal women to be a part of that realm. But if observed profoundly, the entire plot revolves around and in accordance to the female lead. Nandita in *Gunday* is attractive, feminine and heterosexually appealing, appeals not only the male gaze but conversely by introducing action in her personality thereby crafts a new concept, gender blender; a hybrid of masculine and feminine traits. Even the title *Mardaani* as an adjective connotes being manly but here again the entire narrative is skillfully managed by the female cop who chases and eventually confronts a hardcore criminal through evidences and clever techniques.

The feminine traits of Nandita render her to male voyeurism. The song narrative "*Asslam-e-Ishqum*" eroticizes her image and her attire emphasizes feminine attractiveness, signaling receptivity to the male counterparts who are projected as salivating and drooling over the hot, tempting actresses.

Using her sexual appeal, she flawlessly slithers into the life of both the male characters. Without making them realize, she wedges herself between them, thereby, generating a fissure between their earlier projected friendship bonds. Skillfully monitoring

the entire plot, she places them against each other, making the two an easy target for the cops to capture. Had it not been for Nandita, the duo who were earlier known to survive all the pits and falls through their bond of trust, would have persisted till the end. No doubt, Nandita offers a nuanced, distinctive understanding of the female character but the interrogation here is beyond the textual analysis employed by the feminist film study. Observing the contextual factors, the cultural-economic logic behind such representation can be a notable perspective. The objective of such portrayal is to make film stand out at the box office through the merging of multiple processes and practices including stars, franchising, merchandising, technologies, etc. swayed by such technologies, spectators not only watch these movies to examine the cinematic effects but through the consumption of technology, they satisfy their fascination. Watching such a movie serves as a multiple consumptive process wherein females are used as composite commodities; as an instrument of technology and spectacle for audiences to provide them pleasure.

However, her sexual appeal doesn't make her lose her subjectivity or becomes pure object of look. Her overwhelming oxymoronic representation circulates the basic conception of post-feminism which suggests that women should celebrate such position of being subject as it renders them with power. Through her emotional linkage with the male protagonist, she still finds the courage inside her to do what is right. Her vulnerability at that instant causing her to sway for a moment reflects traditionally feminine sphere, while comprehending the truth and executing the plan unequivocally and administering the death blow transits her to move beyond the realm of femininity. Here she epitomizes deluze's notion of becoming. In deluzian terms, Nandita's actions exceed our concepts of feminine passivity by presenting her behavior as masculine, and this novel representation then actualizes an idea which is unfettered by prior categories based on an acceptance of gender binary. Her way of expressing Gender is more transgressive elaborative. Acting merely like a man is not her motive, it is something entirely new: a female bodied person choosing freely from a range of hitherto gender-linked behaviors to create a new mix that enables her to be a new kind of hero. She is specifically a female hero, not just a woman behaving like the archetypal male hero.

Moreover, she epitomizes Butler's notion of gender roles as performative, for she can switch from performing femininity to performing masculinity so well that she is able to shoot her beloved. It can be suggested that she has broadened the concept of masculinity by incorporating both male and female attributes in one body, and this does not disqualify her from being hero. Conversely, the archetypal masculine and feminine traits position her as an entirely different kind of hero i.e., asserting claim on the status previously colonized by men.

In the similar vein, usurping the standard male hero's role, Shivani, the protagonist in *Mardaani* deconstructs the stereotypical myth which suggests that only males are apt for cops' job. A truly androgynous figure, she takes on men, pays them back in the same coin, deliberately uses physical force, abusive language at times, and above all the intellectuality, to reflect how a woman can hold her own self in a male dominated world. The way she teaches law to criminal attests to the fact- "Section 143: unlawful assembling, Section 504: intentional insult with intend to provoke peace, Section 353: assault a criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of duty, *aur kisi ko law sikhna hai*". The physical and mental strain, the continued endurance reflected by the female character is startling. The realistic appearance and the coarse language of the protagonist can be compared to movies with male protagonist like *Singham*, *Dabang*, *A Wednesday*, *Gangajal*. Except for *Singham*, rest of the movies had a box office collection of not more than ten crore but *Mardaani* was a 14 crore rupees budget movie and earned 76.71 crore rupees.

In pursuit of a teenager who is abducted by sex traffickers, the plot revolves around Shivani who stands up for investigations of a victim, struggling hard to get her back from an uncanny, peculiar character, Karan whom she addresses as “under 19 Team ka 12<sup>th</sup> man”. Her portrayal as a female action heroine is not in a verbal but in “action sense”, creating a vision in front of the spectators that the wasteland of our lives cannot be wished away but can be splendidly defied and overcome. Even when the villain threatens her through the medium of insulting her husband in the entire public or by sending her the finger of teenage girl as a gift, she does not wallow in pity instead adopts a positivistic view in the crises. As an evolutionary spirit, she moves from victimization to consciousness and progresses ahead continuing her mission to rescue girls from being a victim of sex trafficking.

Her fight against victory over the evil perpetrators is repeatedly stressed in the song that is being played at the backdrop as the anthem for the movie, “*Aaj se ab se aan meri me tumko na chune dungi, ...maan ko na chune dungi, chuke dekho dil mera tumhe dil me apne bhar lungi, par ched ke dekho tum mujhko, me tumko na chodung*”. Surely she probes the possibility of installing and evolving the androgynous ideal within an individual gender identity. Deconstructed the ideology of gender polarization in Hindi cinema, Shivani has expanded the terrain of masculinity by bringing fresh insights into it, thereby, revealing the category as ‘performative’. Emerging as a central heroic character, her body reflects the capability of not only defending herself from the criminal but destroying him as well which in a way reconstructs the path of gender identity. Reconfiguring the link between power and gender, Shivani opens up a wide range of fantastical possibilities for feminist identifications. Ungrudgingly, the film celebrates her ability and success as a police officer by showing the spectators her elaborative action and skillful management.

Further, both the movies diverge from the genre of being melodramatic by not offering any utopian or idealistic solutions to the problems or any magical wand which will whisk away all forms of oppression. Rather they seek for a light that will eventually spark off selfhood. Highlighting the nuanced understanding of the females in the post-liberalized twenty-first century, the paper discovered the inherent multiplicities within the seemingly homogenous category of Indian femininity. The major findings were:

- (i) Deviating from the presumed image of celluloid women, an element of surprise has been added to the films, forcing the audience to confront their assumption about women. The recurring representation of women as submissive, fragile or helpless has been converted into female actions that reveal strength and courage to perform.
- (ii) Lack of male intervention assists them in resolving the difficult situations themselves projecting how women achieve their goals not how women react to men. Men in these movies are shown as merely hiccups in their lives.
- (iii) Sexual violence like it exists in *Mardaani* doesn’t render woman helpless but in fact gives her the courage to fight and tackle the situation all by herself.
- (iv) Detachment from the larger agendas of patriarchal ideology and the traditional values allows them to explore their trajectories freely.

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**Simran Preet Kaur** is an assistant professor in the Department of Languages and Literature at Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Jammu & Kashmir, India. She has recently submitted her thesis on the portrayal of celluloid females in contemporary Hindi cinema, tracing their transition from negative objectification to generative subjectification.

**Dr. Vandana Sharma** is dean in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Jammu & Kashmir, India. Presently, she is working on contemporary discourses in South Asia. Her areas of interests are post-colonial literature, gender studies, and Indian drama in English and translation.