

Reading the 'New Woman' Trope: Women and Sports Films in Bollywood

Ms. Sadhna Kumari is a PhD scholar, Centre for Media Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Dr. Shuchi Yadav is Chairperson, Centre for Media Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Abstract

This paper explores the evolving representation of women in the sports genre of Hindi cinema, highlighting a significant shift from stereotypical depictions of passive female characters to more nuanced portrayals of empowered women athletes. Through a narrative analysis of three films—*Panga* (2020), *Rashmi Rocket* (2021), and *Shabaash Mithu* (2022)—the study examines how contemporary filmmakers employ gender-sensitive techniques to create complex female protagonists who navigate societal challenges, including class, caste, and patriarchal norms. These films reflect the emergence of the "new woman" trope, which counters traditional narratives of victimization and objectification, portraying women as independent, capable, and assertive in their respective sports. The paper also discusses the broader implications of these cinematic shifts for gender representation in Indian sports films.

Keywords: Hindi cinema, sports films, gender representation, patriarchy, empowerment, Bollywood.

Introduction

The sports genre in Hindi cinema has witnessed a phenomenal transformation in representing women on screen in the last decade. Contemporary filmmakers are attempting to take a more gender-inclusive and gender-sensitive approach, right from conceptualizing a story idea, writing strong female characters and screenplays. Shah Rukh Khan's *Chak De! India* (2007), Farhan Akhtar's *Bhag Milkha Bhaag* (2013), Sushant Singh Rajput's *M.S. Dhoni: An Untold Story* (2016), Amir Khan's *Dangal* (2016), Salman Khan's *Sultan* (2016), and Akshay Kumar's *Gold* (2018) are some of the key examples of this shift. The dominance of cricket on-screen, and its symbolism of hypermasculinity, also underwent a critical shift as 'other' sports, such as hockey, wrestling, boxing and athletics started becoming prominent in storytelling. Through these shifts to 'other' sports, the representation of women and portrayal of female characters also seems interconnected. While the above sports films have storylines revolving around the lives of women sportspersons, their agency remains shadowed until the male-lead (Shahrukh Khan as a coach or Amir Khan as a father) steps in and 'helps' them achieve their goals. Consequently, cinema plots featuring male Bollywood star actors in a variety of roles as athletes, coaches, partners or spouses have largely dominated the genre of sports films in Hindi cinema.

However, women-centric sports films are increasingly attracting filmmakers in India; Bollywood is a case in point where contemporary Hindi sports films are emerging as a popular pursuit. There have been, however, slow yet steady shifts seen in films like *Dil Bole Hadippa* (2009), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Sand Ki Aankh* (2019), *Panga* (2020), *Rashmi Rocket* (2021), *Saina* (2021), and *Shabaash Mithu*

(2022), which have challenged the existing tropes of female characters on-screen. Their achievements, however, are not all about standing on victory podiums but are also accompanied by layered, complex social inequalities based on caste, class, gender and age. While women in these films are portrayed to be jostling with interwoven patriarchal norms, prejudices and biases, they are also simultaneously negotiating, asserting and empowering their ‘selves’ in everyday life.

Representation of women, through female characters in these films, reflects an emergence of what can be identified as trope of the ‘new woman’ (Nijhawan, 2009) in Bollywood. The author highlights the rising popularity of items songs in Bollywood which is now marked by shifts in the image of the woman dancer(s): from a sexualized object of desire(s) towards one who has agency over her actions and desires. Through the cinematic analysis of song *Kajra Re* from the film *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005) the author argues that the dance-song sequence is directed in a manner where the actor Aishwarya Rai is depicted through her assertive eyes; her body movements are of an assertive rather than submissive woman longing for a man’s desire (for example Helen from *Teesri Manzil* 1996) (Nijhawan, 2009). The focus, here, is on the desire of the woman rather than the man. The choice of camera movements highlights this shift in focus where the assertion of woman’s autonomy and choice are primary motive. For Nijhawan (2009), this is a significant rupture in the older notions of women that were chaste and her (re)emergence as a ‘new woman’ who is independent and individualistic.

In light of above arguments, the paper aims to address and respond to issues of women’s representation in sports films in India by exploring films where women as sportspersons are portrayed as independent, competent individuals with strong acumen to achieve status of ‘champions’ in their respective fields. *Panga*, *Rashmi Rocket*, and *Shabaash Mithu* films have been chosen for their focus on women as multilayered protagonists, negotiating complex notions of class, caste, and regional identities on the one hand and patriarchal dominance on the other.

This paper attempts to explore the rise of the ‘new woman’ trope in these three sports films as a response to tropes on victimization, objectification, and marginalization of woman/women. Through a narrative analysis of these three sport films, the shifting nature, patterns and themes of women's representation in sport film genre in India would be discussed. The focus is on discerning film techniques used by filmmakers and their role in constructing an agency-driven, gender-sensitive frame of representation on screen.

The paper is divided into three sections. First section discusses the overview of sports genre in Hindi cinema, which has witnessed shifts in women representation on-screen over the last decade; from using stereotypical images of women as passive figures to ones with agency and decision-making ability. The second part of this paper briefly reviews literature on portrayal of women in sports films both in Indian and global contexts, along with research objectives, questions, and methodology. This is followed by analysis of three film stories, culminating in the final concluding remarks.

Women in Sports Films: An Overview

The representation of gender and the portrayal of women in cinema has been of interest among scholars who have highlighted the influence of both Hollywood and Bollywood influence in terms of

production and marketing (Kavoori and Punathambekar, 2008). Hindi cinema, particularly, has been able to carve out a distinct place for itself, especially post globalization where different film industries have come up with their own production houses in their cultural contexts (Kumar, 2008) like Mumbai for Bollywood, Ramoji Film city for Telugu films industry and so on. Hollywood cinema, on the other hand, has emerged as a metonym for the Western culture. that symbolizes and captures the ethos of America.

The representation of gender in cinema, particularly in Bollywood and Hollywood, has long been scrutinized, with scholars exploring how these industries construct discourses of masculinity and femininity (Crosson, 2013, p. 103). In parallel, the portrayal of women in sports films has emerged as a significant area of study, shedding light on the intersection of gender dynamics within the sporting arena and cinematic narratives. Hollywood's engagement with sports narratives can be traced back to its early inception, where films were (and are) created in a way that portrays and celebrates virtues such as power and strength. Such portrayal has also been historically epitomized in sports like boxing (Scott, 2010). These narratives are predominantly centered around male athletes, rendering women into supporting, more passive roles. This trend has also been observed in films like *The Pinch Hitter* (1917) and *Brown of Harvard* (1926) (Crosson, 2013, p. 106).

In her work on representation of women in cinema, Laura Mulvey critically engages readers to understand the complex and problematic depiction of women in sports films, where they are objectified or portrayed as disruptive figures (Mulvey, 1975; Crosson, 2013, p. 108). Despite gradual shifts towards more progressive representations of women in sports films post-1970s, challenges persist, filmmakers often resort to familiar tropes of objectification and victimhood to appeal to male-dominated audiences (Tudor, 1997, p. 80-81). Films such as *Blue Crush* (2002) and *She's the Man* (2006) illustrate this trend, where female protagonists conform to conventional gender roles despite their athletic abilities (Crosson, 2013, p. 120).

Bollywood cinema also follows similar discourse, where, even though, the portrayal of women in sports has undergone transformation, it has its own set of challenges. Antara Mukherjee (2018), in her discussion of women's representation and its evolution in post-liberalization Bollywood, has highlighted the industry's tendency to sideline female protagonists in sports films. Films like *Azhar* (2016) and *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016) are centered around male protagonist while female actors are written as lacking in both agency and narrative depth (Mukherjee, 2018).

There are instances, however, where Bollywood filmmakers have attempted to disrupt gender norms through sports narratives. Mukherjee (2018) cites films like *Dil Bole Hadippa* (2009) and *Mary Kom* (2016) as examples of 'counter-cinema', where women are portrayed as more than mere objects of desire on screen. These films, along with films like *Chak de! India* (2007) and *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), present alternative constructions of women in sports, breaking away from stereotypical representations and offering nuanced portrayals of female athleticism and agency (Mukherjee, 2018). While these films foreground women's experiences and portray complex interplay of gender, sexuality and feminism within sports narratives (Chakravarty, 2020), they may also reinforce traditional notions of masculinity, thereby perpetuating patriarchal norms (Chakravarty, 2020).

More recent films such as *Panga* (2020), *Saand Ki Aankh* (2019), and *Shabaash Mithu* (2022) have responded to conventional representation of women, offering a more nuanced portrayal of women's experiences in sports (Yadav & Jha, 2023). Incorporating a feminist lens, these films have visualized and vocalized issues of gender discrimination, ageism, and societal expectations while also highlighting the transformative power of sports in empowering women and effecting social change (Yadav & Jha, 2023).

In conclusion, the representation of women in sports films reflects broader societal norms and values, with both Hollywood and Bollywood grappling with issues of gender stereotyping and representation. While progress has been made in challenging traditional narratives, continued efforts are needed to foster more inclusive and empowering portrayals of women in sports cinema.

Research Objectives

1. To highlight the changing nature of women's representation in sports films, from secondary characters to empowered women in Hindi sports films.
2. To map Hindi sports films that have used gender-sensitive filmmaking approach and to investigate the 'new woman' trope in these films.

Research Questions

1. With the steady transformation in representing women in sports films, how do filmmakers choose gender-sensitive film techniques?
2. How does women's agency as sports personalities acquire representation and empowerment in Hindi sports films?

Research Methodology

The paper employs narrative analysis method where focus has been on the plot of the films along with narrative moves and functions. In the context of films, the specificity of the medium also stands out where the cinematic medium along with elements of time (plot duration, story) and space (framing, editing, point of view) are essential components through which narrative analysis of the films are undertaken (Bordwell, 1985). While these elements are essential, the audio and visual systems such as sound, and *mise-en-scene* also plays an essential role in narrative analysis (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). While discussing the three films, *Panga* (2020), *Rashmi Rocket* (2021), and *Shabaash Mithu* (2022), the paper analyses specific scenes and themes crucial for understanding the gender-sensitive representation of women in these sports films.

The next section analyses three films: *Panga* (2020) which is a story about a mother's comeback to the Kabaddi Nationals while she navigates through her dreams and the challenges she faces on the court by selector and her team mates; *Rashmi Rocket* (2021) is about Rashmi's struggle to challenge gender discrimination she faces on field because she has higher level of testosterone in her body; *Shabash*

Mithu (2022) is a biopic on India's former women cricketer Mithali Raj's journey in the male dominated sport of cricket in India.

***Panga* (2020): A Mother's Comeback to Kabbadi Nationals**

Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari directed *Panga*, which centers on the life of Jaya (actress Kanga Ranaut), a Kabaddi player who works in Indian railways, is married, and has a son. She was a Kabaddi player who, due to certain circumstances, left the game and settled for a married life. The film diverts from the traditional tropes of sports films where the sport coach is always a man. There is also Meenu (played by Richa Chadda), a coach and Jaya's ex-teammate and friend. Railway officials remind Jaya, as events unfold, that she is no longer a Kabaddi player and cannot take leave without informing them. She is often in a dilemma about whether she is a good mother, but she finds support from her husband, who recognizes her sacrifices for him and his son.

Her husband reminisces about Jaya's Kabaddi days, when she excelled for the railway Kabaddi team and even qualified for the Asian Games, but she gave up her career for their newborn son. She agrees to start practicing at her son's request. Despite her son's request, she takes the defeat by young players seriously and intensifies her practice. She finds support from her husband, son, and her friend Meenu to come back. Even when offered, she declines to join the Eastern Railway team. The camera tracks her journey from the game to the practice session. The family faces a dilemma as Jaya immerses herself in her training, leaving her husband and son at home alone. The shots cut to their lives. On the other side, she plays her selection match, but her son fails to perform on stage during a school function.

Post selection Jaya becomes a household name via the news, where people support her choices and struggles. When the national team selection process commences, people question Jaya's abilities and use her as a sympathy prop to draw attention from the audience. The selection board chooses Jaya based on her popularity and the sympathy she receives for returning to the court as a mother. Jaya's disappointment is evident when they decide to keep her as a reserved player. The film follows a formulaic approach, with the first part setting the scene, the middle half advancing the story, and the final part achieving the resolution. In the final scene, Jaya finally gets a chance to play on the team and prove her worth to the national team. India wins the final match, with Jaya leading the team to victory by crossing the final line. The camera's slow movement symbolizes her struggle and journey.

A distinct trope in the film is that of a female coach rather than the conventional, arrogant male authority. Generally, male characters in most of the sports films are strict and former players who had to quit their dream due to circumstances in their lives. For example, in the film *Mary Kom* (2014), we see characters such as coach Kabir from *Chak De! India* (2007), Mary Kom's coach, or Mahavir sternly instructing their school-going daughters in *Dangal* (2016). The protagonist brings their dreams to life by rigorously training and preparing them for both the nation and competition. Richa Chadda, Jaya's friend and current Kabaddi coach, plays Meenu in *Panga*. This implies that Jaya decides to return to the sport on her own initiative and with a desire to reclaim her identity as a national Kabaddi player.

Panga deviates from the stereotypical representation of women who are either sacrificial figures or too ambitious to break the chains of monotony. The film also does not exaggerate the melodramatic sequences, especially with his son when she departs for training, leaving him and her husband behind. The mother-son duo does not dominate the narrative of the film; it actually focuses on Jaya's comeback to the game. Even on screen, the film does not explicitly show Jaya's husband as a sacrificing husband but rather a supportive husband, which contests the usual representation of male partner, brother, and father.

Rashmi Rocket (2021): Questioning Gender Biasness

Akarsh Khurana directed *Rashmi Rocket*, which features actress Tapsee Pannu as Rashmi, a tourist guide. The director introduces Rashmi as an independent woman who makes her own decisions, distinguishing herself from other girls by not confining herself to the house. She rides a bike, wears jeans and a t-shirt, and does many other things, such as looking after her mother's business in the village to support women. Rashmi introduces her athletic spirit to the audience by running to rescue one of the Army personnel she was giving a tour of the area. She decides to resume athletics in accordance with her mother's wishes. Soon, the bar of her performance is all over the media and gets popular like a rocket.

The camera cuts directly to the selection room, where her natural ability and sportsmanship on the field are evident. The series of gender harassment starts when she is called *launda* (man) by her physic. The film immerses viewers in the transformation of athletics, showcasing a budget crisis-free environment, well-equipped gyms and training facilities, and coaches of high caliber, in contrast to the depiction in *Chak de! India* (2007), where girls faced discrimination and lacked government support. When she wins three consecutive medals and undergoes a medical test to determine her gender and drug consumption, it casts doubt on her spirit. We witness the manifestation of gender discrimination in the form of medical checkups, derogatory remarks from teammates, and media reports. The film employs the usual troop of media, in which Rashmi's character is assassinated by calling her male, *raja* and *Mardana* (masculine). This is the moment where the film tries to reflect on the issue of discrimination among female athletes in sports. One of the board members secretly arrests Rashmi to enable her athlete daughter to compete and win medals for the nation, further triggering the sequence.

The film offers a different perspective than the usual Bollywood sports film, with a legal angle to the sports on screen. The film's concluding part takes place in a courtroom, where the sportsperson seeks justice, rather than on the field. Usually, the protagonist, who is a sportsperson, finds justice on the field by upholding the nation's pride despite societal and political challenges. However, *Rashmi Rocket* successfully defended the nation's image in court.

Shabaash Mithu (2022); A Story of Hope and Resilience and Women Friendship

Srijit Mukherji directed *Shabaash Mithu*, a biopic on the life of Indian woman cricketer Mithali Raj, who has poignantly contributed to making women's cricket in India a household name. Actress Tapsee Pannu plays a leading role as Mithali Raj, aka Mithu, in this film. Despite cricket's popularity in India,

women's cricket has not been able to make a mark among cricket fans. The reflects upon the challenges women face in a highly male dominated in cricket, India where men are respected for their performance while women continue to disappear in crowd.

The film introduces this issue with a very striking scene where a boy is urinating while he stands, and another child enters the frame trying to urinate while standing. The scene cuts to the boy's face, where he says, "*Ye patti logo ka kaam nahi hai* (this is not the girl's job)". The scene cuts to the field, where the girl, Noorie, takes a wicket among all the boys and beats the boy. Noorie finds herself compelled to learn Bharatnatyam to conform to feminine behavior. Noorie and Mithali find solace in an isolated field, where they only play. They face the real task when the girls play their first match against the boys. When Mithali does not miss a single ball, it clearly illustrates the uneasiness among the boys.

The first time Mithali went against the patriarchal norm was when she chopped her hair to play cricket. The film depicts women's struggles in cricket through the character of Noorie, a talented bowler who marries at the age of 15 and forfeits her opportunity to play for the national team. Mithu grapples with societal expectations, the cricket board's disinterest in female players, and her quest to earn respect for the Indian women's team. In a kitchen and dining area, we witness the deteriorating condition of the women's cricket team, where players engage in discussions about pickles, the traditional method of making leather from animal skin, and their views on men. Mithu is not welcomed by the team, and they ask her to prove herself on the field.

The film also features typical plot elements, including a jealous senior player who fears imminent replacement. The board meeting was full of male board members who decided the future of the women's cricket team by asking them how many people knew about women cricket players. In one of the scenes, a board member asks the peon who is a big fan of cricket to tell at least one women cricket player, which he fails to do while the entire cricket team stands in front of him. We capture the moments of humiliation when the women's cricket team, route to England, receives a request to reduce the weight of their baggage as the men's cricket team passes by, to which the entire airport responds with a chorus of "India, India." No one from the team could sleep after the humiliation at the airport. Like other sports films, the second part depicts Mithu's journey in cricket after her coach's death. In a monologue, Mithali expresses her frustration with the lack of respect, saying, "*Ghure ke bajey agar gaur se dekhte toh dikh jate*" (Instead of staring at us, had you noticed, then maybe you could see us).

As the World Cup approaches, the "women in blue" come to life on screen, and Mithali returns to the cricket team after reuniting with Noorie. The series of winning matches in the World Cup starts, and the team finally makes it to the final to play against England. Almost all sports films achieve resolution through the team's victory in the match, but in this case, the team's loss mirrors real-life events. The media and the public greet the team at the airport upon their return, appreciating their efforts. When they receive recognition and respect from the women in blue, the team finds resolution. The film, which revolves around Mithu's life and the discrimination in women's cricket, concludes with the PM's voiceover, "*Aap cup bhale na laye ho, magar apne pure Hindustan ka dil jeet liya hai.*" (even if you didn't bring the cup home, you have won the heart of every Hindustani). Overall, the film highlights the struggle and resilience of the women team through female friendship. The film gracefully addresses social issues like caste, sanitation, and gender discrimination, not just cricket.

Conclusion

In discussion of the above-mentioned three films, we find that Hindi films have registered a slow transition in depicting women in sports films from being passive characters to active participants in their storytelling. The changing film techniques employed to depict story-telling have made this transition possible. Instead of using regressive dialogue and limited space on screen, filmmakers are now choosing full-length films centered around women and their issues. For example, *Panga* shifts from a heavy focus on the mother figure to Jaya's return to the national league. In *Rashmi Rocket*, the quest for justice unfolds within the confines of the courtroom, departing from the traditional depiction of victory in the game's final match. The director of *Shabaash Mithu*, focuses on telling the story of the Indian women cricket team rather than the final win, so he chooses not to make the final match the ultimate winning game. In conclusion, the shift in representation of women in sports films in Hindi cinema is a significant step towards empowering women on screen.

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