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Portrayal of Sex Workers in Hindi Cinema

Kritika Singhal

Abstract: ***This paper will study the different aspects in which prostitution has been portrayed in the Indian cinema. Bollywood has mostly been infamous in its portrayal of women characters in general. There is primarily a stereotypical, misogynistic outlook in the way female prostitutes are perceived in art, whether it be literature or cinema. Along with this, there has been an overt romanticisation of female prostitutes over the decades. This paper is an attempt to portray the different aspects of prostitution as reflected in the journey of Hindi cinema from as early as the 1950s. The criteria of analysis for this paper will majorly be two dimensional. Firstly, to contrast movies from different eras;from black and white movies such as Pyaasa[1957] to movies as modern as Gangubai Kathiawadi[2022]. The motive to inculcate this criteria is to highlight the slight evolution in the representation of female prostitutes; from the continuous trope of 'damsel in distress' who has a heart of gold to the girlboss of modern Indian cinema.***

Secondly, these movies will be critiqued through a gendered lens and focusing on the difference in portrayal of such female characters under a male director and a female director. There has been an absence of female narratives in cinema in India. Most of the movies cater to the 'male gaze' which is threefold; that of the man behind the camera, the male characters and the seemingly male-centric audience. A more technical stance on the subject will focus on dissecting the intention behind the costumes of these characters, the lighting, the (zoomed in)camera angles, dialogues etc.

Some of the films that I would like to discuss in this paper are: Devdas (1955), Pyaasa (1957), Pakeeza (1972), Chameli (2004), Julie (2004), Dev D (2009), Talaash (2012), Gangubai Kathiawadi(2022).

I. INTRODUCTION

Sex work is one of the oldest professions to exist in India and thus, has centuries of baggage and history associated with it. In Hindi films, a prostitute is more of a cliche than a character. From her identification as a social deviation with a heart of gold to be palatable in spite of who she is and be worthy of eventual emancipation, to the idea of a sex worker that slashes them to just their sexuality, taking away their choice and agency.

This paper focuses on the difference in the depiction of sex workers in Hindi cinema. The analysis will comprise comparing Hindi movies decade-wise starting from the 1950s that involve the representation of sex workers and prostitution, at large, in any way.

The 1950s films come under the unmatched era of Hindi cinema, the Golden Age, which is said to have produced some of the most critically acclaimed Hindi films of all time. One such film is *Pyaasa*(1957), directed by Guru Dutt, which revolves around a struggling poet, Vijay, who along with his poetry is ridiculed by everyone except for a prostitute, Gulaabo. The character of Gulaabo, if independently seen, deserves appreciation. She reads poetry and stands up for herself whenever required. The shift in power dynamics in the film is one of its most intriguing elements; while Gulaabo is financially secure and makes money, Vijay, the named 'hero,' is dependent on her to pay for his food. Additionally, the portrayal of the prostitute is less voyeuristic when compared to more contemporary films.

However, all of these components contribute to the well-known cliche of the 'golden-hearted prostitute' that can be seen in many films from the twentieth century.

Additionally, the plot's elements in some ways seemed to echo those of *Devdas* (1955). Gulaabo and Chandramukhi, the tawaif in *Devdas*, begin to care for the drunk and worship him as he muses over his past lover. These movies lack a narrative from a prostitute's point of view, with no regard for their backstory. The practice of prostitution is rendered subservient to the romantic and the glamorous angle. Prostitution is treated as an afterthought when the glamorous and romantic perspective is taken into consideration.

The debut of *Mughal-e-Azam*, one of the most lauded Indian films to date, signaled the start of the following decade. It is the only movie on prostitution in the 1960s that depicts how prostitutes lack the liberty to fall in love and lead regular lives. Anarkali, the female lead, endures a great deal of hardship simply because she is a courtesan and dared to fall in love with Salim, the Emperor's son. Even her name, which means 'pomegranate blossom,' conveys the idea that she is a weak character. Her existence is ruled by two men: Akbar, who won't allow her to be with Salim, and Salim, who won't let her live peacefully without him.

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Continuing with the legacy of courtesan culture and aesthetics like in *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Pakeezah*(1972) is very different from movies surrounding prostitution, produced in the latter half of the decade. This might be because the movie took fourteen years to be made, with its shooting starting in the late 1950s. Even the name of the film, *Pakeezah*, is a cruel irony that makes one consider the expectations placed on women in terms of absolute innocence and purity. The film makes a point about courtesans' lack of agency. The protagonist and courtesan, Sahibjaan, is the focal point of interest, but she feels powerless and jailed; she compares herself to the bird in the cage.

In the 1970s, films presented sex workers, and women in general, as characters who reflected society's aspirations and that of the men in society. According to these movies, the only redeemable way for a sex worker was to be accepted by a man. *Amar Prem*, which was released in the same year as *Pakeezah*, focuses on Pushpa, a sex worker, and her regular customer Anand Babu. The movie seems to highlight Pushpa's maternal qualities toward her neighbour Nandu, *in spite of* her being a prostitute. Pushpa's tendency to dress as a married lady and her rendition of Anand Babu and Nandu as her husband and kid, respectively, demonstrate the movie's attempt to make Pushpa's character fit the stereotype of an average homemaker and be deemed acceptable by the audience even after her 'transgressions'.

However, there is a noticeable difference in how a sex worker is portrayed in *Mausam* (1975), when Sharmila Tagore's character dresses in 'improper' attire, consumes alcohol, smokes and swears. The movie's hero then decides how to 'reform' the prostitute. Additionally, a distinction is created between what is thought to be the values or traits of a virtuous woman and that of a fallen woman through clothing, language, and mannerisms. The victim-identity of the prostitute has received more attention in Bollywood than her agency because it elicits the most sympathy from viewers, has greater economic value, is the least multifaceted, and provides room for both romance and exhibitionism. Movies like *Pakeezah, Amar Prem, and Devdas* focused more on the courtesan culture that prevailed in ancient India, where courtesans were considered female elites. Before the British government decided to regulate prostitution, which made it lose its cultural value and opened prostitutes for exploitation.

The movies in the 1980s withdrew from opting for the glamorized version of prostitutes and made movies that were more realistic in their approach, set, clothing, and character traits. *Mandi*(1983) is a depiction of the degeneration of courtesan culture. The outlook

and themes opted in *Mandi* are way ahead of their time, something for which it has been appreciated since its release. The film exposes the fallibility of a patriarchal, corrupt culture that rejects prostitutes in the name of virtue. The same men who visit a brothel in the middle of the night to satisfy their carnal demands speak of relocating it during the day. The women take a stand on how no one calls out men, who are the ones to come and pay at their brothel because it is easier to blame and cast aside women than it is to hold men accountable. The conversation following this discourse is similar to the one shown in *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, a movie released almost four decades later. Additionally, it is one of the first few films that show female solidarity and companionship amongst sex workers, something which would become a commonality in all the upcoming movies under this theme.

Another thing that sets the 80s apart is the theme of prostitution explored under a female director. Mira Nair released two movies, *Indian Cabaret*(1985*) and Salaam Bombay!* (1988), both unique in their approach to this theme. In the documentary *Indian Cabaret*, the lives of two cabaret dancers are chronicled. While the protagonists capitalize on their sexuality to create a living out of desperation and poverty, the documentary also examines another perspective, which is their enjoyment of sexual pleasure. The film also makes a point on how patriarchy labels women as either good or bad, marriable or unmarriable, but in fact, both have the same aspirations and experience comparable oppression. At the same time, there is no glamour in *Salaam Bombay!* by Nair, a realistic film. The entirety of Nair's film was shot on location in the filthy alleyways and brothels of Mumbai's Kamathipura and the nearby Falkland Road. The Kamathipura shown in *Salaam Bombay!* is different from that shown in Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, which is more glamorous and meant for its commercial audience.

1990s movies are known for their exaggerated melodrama and commercial-orientedness. *Sadak(*1991) starts the stereotypical casting of transgenders as vile pimps. Instead of movies that show transgenders working as prostitutes, they are characterized as either pimps or beggars in movies. This also highlights the lack of acceptance and recognition of other genders and sexualities in mainstream Hindi Cinema.

The advent of the new century brought in different representations of sex workers. On one hand, the mainstream Bollywood movies that still pertained to the idea of the 70s were *Devdas*(2002) and *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke*(2001). *Devdas* claims that the sex worker is not a woman because she does not fulfill the socially prescribed household role for women. *"A woman is a mother, a sister, a wife, a friend. When she is nothing, she is a prostitute." Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* is a similar story of making a 'good girl' out of a sex worker. In line with this interpretation of *Devdas*, the film aims to convey Madhu's salvation by arousing her maternal love for her unborn child and desire for a husband.

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The movie seemed to point out how unfulfilled a woman's life feels if she doesn't have a husband and a child.

Nonetheless, on the other hand, movies like *Chandini Bar, In The Flesh, Water, and Dev D* were released. *Chandni Bar* is a hard-hitting realistic depiction of the life of a Mumbai 'beer bar' dancer and the vicious cycle of this profession and quality of life that can't be escaped. One problematic stereotyping that movies surrounding sex workers across decades have done is always characterize people involved in this business as Muslims. Whether it be *Pakeezah, Tawaif, or Chandini Bar.*

However, in a positive light, another pattern is of women directing documentaries or non-commercial movies. Their main motive was not to earn money but to show social biases and injustices toward marginalized groups.

Another women-directed documentary on sex workers is *In The Flesh*(2002), which revolves around three sex workers. Ironically, in the background of the first scene of the film, the song 'Inhi Logo Ne' from *Paakizah* was playing, mocking the stark contrast between the lives of sex workers as depicted in films to that with their real lives. This is the only film across decades that shows a transgender as a sex worker. Documentaries like *Indian Cabaret* and *In the Flesh* are important as they give sex workers the medium to control their narrative, something which is rarely ever given.

In *Water* (2003), the role of religion to control and oppress a group of women is examined, as is the way that patriarchal imperatives shape religious belief. Again, societal hypocrisies are directed. On the one hand, widows were expected to remain chaste throughout their remaining lives and refrain from engaging in any sexual activity; on the other hand, they were forcibly pimped out to mint money.

In the 2000s, films had many different facets and didn't just employ sex workers as a cliché or a plot device to appeal to the audience's sympathies or to add glitz, in contrast to earlier films. Modern films are more sensitive and address significant problems including sex worker violence, inadequate police protection, and the debate over decriminalizing the trade. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of films that depict people selecting this profession voluntarily rather than being forced into it. The frequent depiction of women being pushed into prostitution by a man and then saved by another man has turned the profession into an absolute site of compulsion.

However, for once, Neh Dhupia's character in *Julie* (2003) chooses the profession rather than being forced to do it by a malicious criminal.

Another character that voluntarily joins this profession is Leni in *Dev D*(2009). The way that sex work is portrayed as a personal decision drives home the point that a woman's control over her body and sexuality is also a feminist concept. Leni's half-time job was a

purposeful decision on her part and her open relationship with her pimp Chunni and other sex workers. is a refreshing perspective. This Chanda is a contemporary interpretation of the *Devdas* character Chandramukhi. Chanda is presented as an individual and her personality, which is not only tied to her profession, in the film, touches on the rarely acknowledged humanistic aspect of sex workers. Her thoughts, feelings, and emotions are taken into consideration, which is uncommon in films that deal with prostitution. Perhaps the reason why most movies on sex workers depict them being forced into it and their way out is inescapable is that the other option; that of a person, majorly woman, willingly choosing this profession and owing the autonomy on their body and embracing their sexuality is a threat to the patriarchal society; and something that is against their view of woman as the goddess of purity.

One of the most important films to analyze for this paper, *B.A. Pass*(2012) was released in the 2010s. It is the only movie that depicts a male sex worker. The portrayal of female sex workers has been so constant that sex workers are automatically categorized as women by many, which is a wrong representation as sex work is a profession exercised by people of all genders. Though the film is appreciable for its rare outlook, the sheer and clear-cut difference between the portrayal of a female and a male sex worker, was ghastly. The lack of skimpy clothing, curt language, 'mujras' and sexually-graphic songs was a reminder of the laughable advantages faced by women, in real life and their reel depiction.

The unprecedented and special thing about the movies of the 2010s is that every movie doesn't use the character of a sex worker just for the sake of a multi-dimensional plot but to explore a never-discussed-before issue surrounding sex workers and their rights. *Talaash*(2012) grapples with the security of sex workers and how unsafe they are due to the lack of laws that protect them. The movie multiple times shows women being abused, and sometimes murdered, yet they are not even eligible to have police reports registered. The harsh truth of sex workers being excluded from society and not considered citizens that deserve the same respect and security is brought up in the movie. Kareena Kapoor played the role of a sex worker for the second time; the first being in *Chameli*(2004) and there is a drastic change in the description of Rosy/Simran and Chameli. In *Chameli* directed by Sudhir Mishra, Kareena's outward mannerisms depended on stereotypical tropes such as chewing paan and using swear words. There was even a dance in the rain to perhaps reflect her innocence and romanticize her.

Whereas, in *Talaash* directed by Reema Kagti, there are no such stereotypical tropes or exaggerated language deviations, and especially no songs that sexualize the female protagonist for the male audience.

Another movie is *Anaarkali of Aarah(*2017) which ventures into unexplored territory. This film again shows how a woman's agency or consent matters irrespective of her profession.

The importance and need for women's agency is incredibly highlighted in *Tikli and Laxmi Bomb*(2017) which offers a riveting treatise on the lives of sex workers without alienating them or demeaning their profession and is a film of rare sensitivity. More than showing women who get into this profession willing to earn money, it also focuses more on the power hierarchies that exist. It raises the question of why they are in charge of pimps when it is they who work and put their safety at risk. It dethrones the assumption that sex workers are victims who need rehabilitation and protection from pimps and brothel owners, who are particularly men, *"why do we give men so much permission? It is our business, our body- not theirs!"* Even the characters of sex workers are completely different from that of earlier Umrao Jaan(s), Devdasi(s), or Pushpa(s). They are not damsels in distress anymore and can take care of their safety.

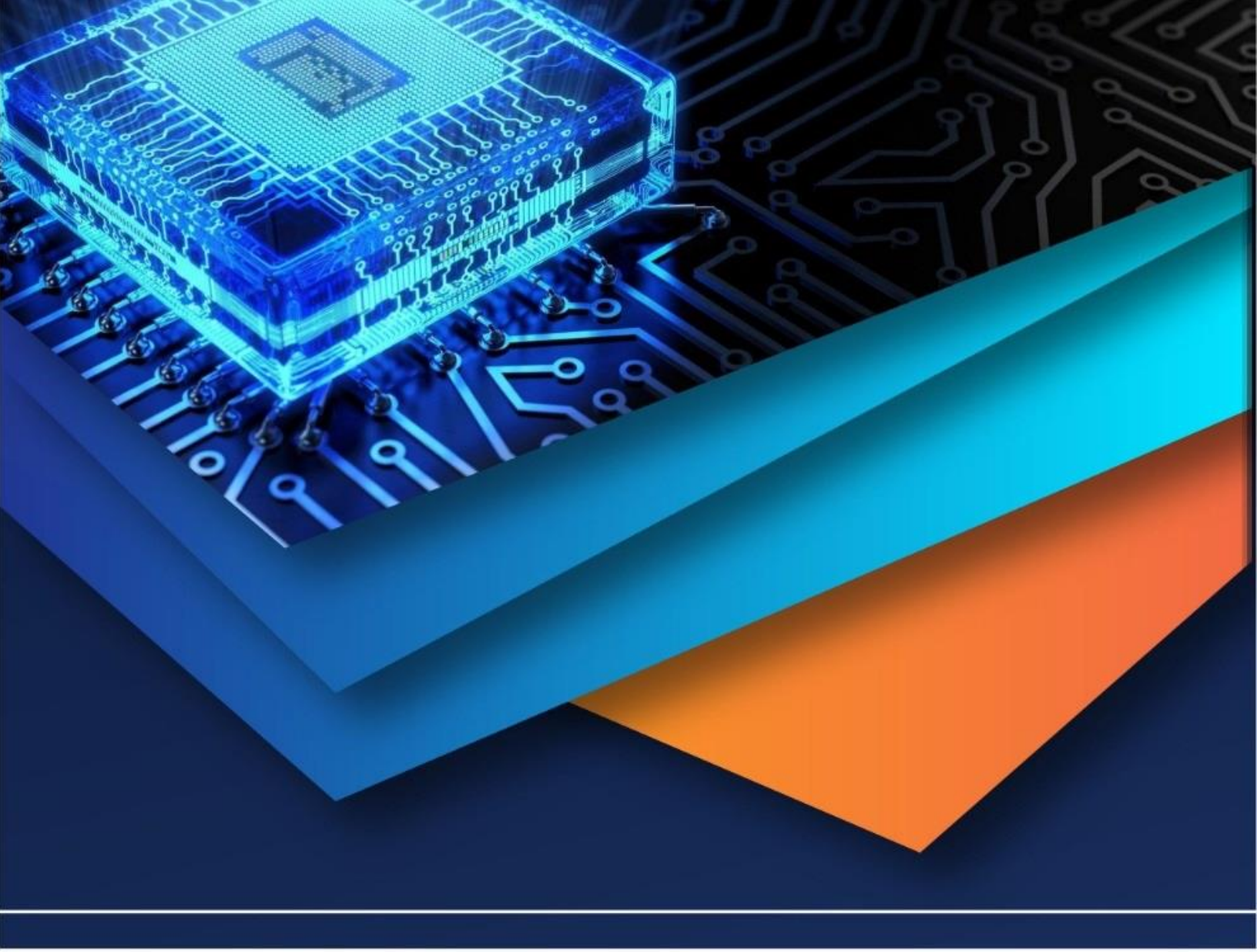
Then, at last, the 2020s witnessed the theatrical release of *Gangubai Kathiawadi*(2022) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The movie through certain scenes stressed the need to perceive sex workers as working citizens. when Gangubai takes all her friends to the cinema and a man badgers and catcalls her. She hits back at him and asks, *"Can't we even take one day off in peace?"* Thus, emphasizing how though it is a job, there is no holiday, and they are expected to engage sexually with anyone, anywhere.

If nothing else, Bhansali's evolution of sex workers needs to be appreciated from Chandramukhi, who was given no identity of her own, to the madam boss, Gangubai.

Politicians and activists must begin to look beyond simple measures like rehabilitation and fight for sex workers and the protection of their legal rights and social inclusion. As long as prostitution is depicted in films, it's critical that the gender binary be abandoned and that sex workers are portrayed as people rather than as objects of study. Films that show and normalize sex workers of all genders and not only women are essential. These actors should also play roles other than the negative pimp. Furthermore, there has been little effort to address and have a conversation about major issues like sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), medical care, and fundamental rights that sex workers are devoid of. The most effective media is still films. Considering this, it is imperative that films depict the actual struggles that sex workers confront in a culture that does not value them as individuals.

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