



FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM: EVOLVING REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

The representation of women in Indian cinema has evolved significantly, reflecting broader societal changes in gender norms and roles. Historically, women were often relegated to passive roles, primarily as symbols of beauty or victims in male-driven narratives. However, contemporary cinema has seen a paradigm shift, with female characters portrayed as strong, complex, and independent figures. This paper explores this evolution by examining films such as *Chak De! India*, *Mary Kom*, *Dangal*, *Panga*, and *Saina* which focus on female athletes who challenge traditional gender expectations and societal norms to achieve greatness. These narratives emphasize the resilience and determination of women in overcoming personal and societal obstacles, positioning them as agents of change.

The discussion also draws parallels with the works of prominent literary figures like Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* highlighted the societal constraints placed on women's creative expression, arguing that economic independence and personal space were vital for women to achieve artistic success. Similarly, Austen's novels presented women as intelligent, independent and capable of navigating a patriarchal society with grace and wit. Both authors' works laid the foundation for a more nuanced portrayal of women in literature which has influenced cinematic representations.

Furthermore, this paper examines the growing presence of women in technical roles within the film industry such as direction, cinematography and sound editing. The increasing involvement of women behind the camera is transforming the filmmaking process and leading to a more inclusive and innovative cinematic landscape. Through an analysis of both on-screen portrayals and behind-the-scenes contributions, this paper highlights the ongoing transformation of women's roles in Indian cinema, emphasizing their impact on the industry's creative and cultural development.

Keywords: Cinematic empowerment, literary influence, narratives of Self-Discovery, resilience and resistance.

Introduction

The representation of women in Indian cinema has evolved significantly over the years, mirroring the broader social and cultural shifts regarding gender roles. Historically, women in films were often relegated to secondary or decorative roles, embodying idealized femininity or playing passive figures. However, contemporary cinema now portrays women as strong, complex and multifaceted individuals, reflecting the growing recognition of women's agency in society. This change is particularly evident in the portrayal of female athletes and their narratives of resilience, determination and self-empowerment in films such as *Chak De! India*, *Mary Kom*, *Dangal*, *Panga*, and *Saina*. These films highlight women's struggles against societal norms and their eventual triumphs in a male-dominated world.

This shift in portrayal parallels the ideas put forth by literary figures such as Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen. In her seminal work, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf argued that women were historically deprived of

the opportunity to create and express themselves due to societal and institutional barriers. She emphasized the necessity of space and financial independence for women to be able to write and engage in creative work. Similarly, Jane Austen's novels, while rooted in the socio-cultural constraints of her time, showcased strong, independent female characters who navigated these constraints with intelligence and wit, offering a nuanced portrayal of women's experiences in a patriarchal society.

Drawing from these literary precedents, Indian cinema has increasingly recognized the importance of portraying women as active agents in their own stories. In addition to on-screen representation, women have also begun to make significant strides behind the camera. More women are now taking up roles as directors, cinematographers, and technicians, contributing their unique perspectives to the filmmaking process. This paper explores the growing prominence of women in Indian cinema, both as characters and creators, analyzing how films and their technical aspects are being reshaped by female voices. By examining the journey of women athletes in film and the contributions of female filmmakers, this paper highlights the intersection of gender, media and creative expression, underscoring the continued evolution of women's roles in the cinematic and literary worlds.

Society comprises both men and women, yet despite the notion of equal rights, true equality remains elusive. Traditional roles have long dictated expectations—women are seen as caretakers of the home, while men bear the financial responsibility. These rigid roles have historically led to the denial of fundamental rights to women, including education, legal protections, and personal freedom.

Gender discrimination is deeply entrenched in societal structures and has been a central theme in feminist literature. As literature serves as a reflection of life, many authors have captured the struggles faced by women, particularly in their pursuit of education, creative expression and the publication of their works. The experiences of prominent women writers offer insight into these challenges.

Jane Austen, one of the most celebrated romantic novelists, authored six remarkable novels but often wrote in seclusion. She had to quickly hide her manuscript beneath her knitting yarn when someone used to enter her room. Despite her literary brilliance, she struggled to secure a publisher during her lifetime and many of her works were only published posthumously. Her story is a testament to the barriers faced by women in literature and society at large.

Over time, women have fought relentlessly against these societal barriers, striving for recognition, equality and the freedom to express themselves. The rise of feminist literature played a crucial role in amplifying their voices, shedding light on their struggles and challenging patriarchal norms. From Virginia Woolf's advocacy for women's intellectual independence in *A Room of One's Own* to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's depiction of female oppression in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, literature has been a powerful tool for revolution. These writings not only reflect the personal battles of their authors but also inspire future generations to continue the fight for gender equality. Today, although progress has been made, the echoes of past discrimination persist, reminding us that the journey towards true equality is ongoing.

In her landmark work *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf highlights how women were historically deprived of education because no one was willing to fund universities for them. They were also denied legal rights, personal space and freedom. As a result, women's writings were often dismissed as mere expressions of their struggles and discrimination, making it difficult for them to get published. Woolf argues that women writers were just as talented as their male counterparts but remained unrecognized. She illustrates this through the fictional character of Judith Shakespeare, the imagined sister of William Shakespeare. Although Judith is equally gifted, her family discourages her from writing. Lacking opportunities and support, she ultimately dies in obscurity.

Woolf's essay emphasizes that creative freedom is deeply tied to material conditions. She famously asserts that a woman must have "money and a room of her own" (06), if she is to write fiction. This statement underscores the importance of financial independence and personal space, essentials that were historically denied to women. Without these, even the most talented women were unable to cultivate their potential. Woolf's critique is not just about the past; it is a call to recognize and dismantle the systemic barriers that continue to hinder women's participation in intellectual and artistic fields.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf explored the systemic barriers that hindered women's creative expression and intellectual development. She argued that for centuries, women were denied education, financial independence, and personal freedom—conditions necessary for producing literature or engaging in creative professions. Woolf's metaphorical "room" symbolized the space and autonomy women needed to think, write and be recognized. Her insights, though based on early 20th-century England, resonate globally and across various mediums, including cinema.

The legacy of such marginalization is visible in the evolution of women's representation in Indian cinema. Much like the literary world Woolf critiqued, Indian cinema too reflected a society where women's voices

were often silenced or sidelined. For decades, female characters were confined to decorative roles or portrayed through limited, stereotypical lenses—as submissive wives, suffering mothers, or antagonists in domestic drama. However, just as Woolf envisioned a future where women would reclaim their voices, Indian cinema has gradually begun to reimagine and reconstruct female characters with greater depth, agency, and complexity.

The role of women in Indian cinema has undergone a significant transformation over time. In the earlier decades of Hindi cinema, female characters were often portrayed as ornamental figures or limited to roles that reinforced stereotypes, either as passive victims or as antagonists in domestic conflicts. Rarely were women shown as independent individuals with agency, capable of resisting injustice or making their own decisions. However, recent years have witnessed a shift in this portrayal, with the emergence of women-centric films that focus on female strength, resilience, and autonomy.

One notable example is the film *Raazi* (2018), which tells the story of Sehmat, a young Indian woman who becomes a spy in Pakistan during the Indo-Pak war of 1971. An intelligent and promising student, Sehmat is thrust into a world of espionage after her father, a committed Indian intelligence agent, discovers he is terminally ill. Determined to continue his legacy and serve the nation, he arranges Sehmat's marriage into a high-ranking Pakistani military family. Despite the immense personal risks, Sehmat undertakes her mission with courage and conviction, gathering and passing critical intelligence to India. Her actions not only demonstrate deep patriotism but also highlight the strength and capability of women in roles traditionally reserved for men. "According to Harnidh Kaur, 'Sehmat', portrayed beautifully by Alia Bhatt, is not a born hero. She does not miraculously acquire abilities beyond herself and does not present herself as more than human." She's flawed, cripplingly so, with a heart as soft as her work is hard". Sehmat's story represents a growing trend in Indian cinema where women are portrayed as central figures—brave, intelligent, and empowered to shape their destinies.

Chak De! India, released in 2007, received critical acclaim for its powerful and inspiring narrative centred around a women's national hockey team. The film played a significant role in challenging the gender stereotypes deeply embedded in Indian society, particularly the belief that women are less capable than men in competitive sports. By focusing on the journey of female hockey players who overcome internal conflicts, societal biases and a lack of institutional support, the film emphasized the need for equal opportunities based on merit rather than gender. It also brought much-needed visibility to women's hockey, a sport often overshadowed by its male counterpart in India.

One of the standout characters in the film is Komal Chautala, portrayed by Chitrashi Rawat. Komal is a spirited young player from Haryana, a state often criticized for its conservative views on women's freedom and participation in public life. Her character embodies both the struggle and resilience of many young girls who dare to defy societal expectations to pursue their passions. Through Komal, the film sheds light on the reality that even today, many girls face restrictions when it comes to choosing careers, especially in sports. *Chak De! India* not only celebrated women's athleticism but also served as a cultural commentary on the need to support and empower women across all spheres of life.

Another notable character in *Chak De! India* is Preeti Sabarwal, played by Sagarika Ghatge, portrayed as a skilled and confident hockey player. Coming from a privileged background, Preeti faces emotional conflict when her wealthy fiancé repeatedly undermines her ambitions, suggesting that her career in sports is secondary to her future role as his wife. Rather than succumbing to societal expectations or personal pressure, Preeti chooses to assert her independence by ending the relationship and dedicating herself fully to the game. Her decision to prioritize her passion and professional goals over traditional gender roles reflects the broader theme of female empowerment in the film. Preeti's journey serves as a powerful example of a woman reclaiming control over her own life and career, ultimately achieving success on her terms.

Women are often perceived as gentle, yet they possess a fierce inner strength that enables them to overcome adversity and face life's toughest challenges. Cinema, as a powerful medium of expression, has increasingly begun to portray this duality and resilience of womanhood. One such film that effectively captures this spirit is *Mary Kom* (2014), starring Priyanka Chopra in the titular role. Based on the real-life story of Indian boxing champion Mary Kom, the film stands out as a rare woman-centric biopic that received both critical acclaim and commercial success.

Mary Kom broke conventional norms in Indian cinema by showcasing a female protagonist who is not only a mother and wife but also an internationally celebrated athlete. The film highlights her determination to return to boxing after childbirth, despite societal and personal challenges. Just like the real Mary Kom, the character in the film demonstrates exceptional perseverance, strength, and passion. The story is a tribute to the indomitable spirit of women who refuse to be defined by limitations, proving that they can excel in any field, including those traditionally dominated by men.

Mary Kom's story is one of extraordinary perseverance, determination and passion. As a six-time World Amateur Boxing Champion, she holds the distinction of being the only woman boxer to win a medal in each edition of the World Championships she competed in—a testament to her unmatched consistency and skill. Her achievements are particularly remarkable given that professional boxing, especially in India, has long been viewed as a male-dominated sport.

Coming from a modest background in Manipur, Mary Kom faced numerous challenges, including financial constraints, limited training facilities and societal expectations that often discourage women from pursuing careers in physically demanding sports. Despite these obstacles, she rose to international prominence, becoming not only a sporting icon but also a symbol of empowerment for countless women. Her journey highlights the broader theme of female resilience and the power of breaking stereotypes, making her a fitting subject for a biopic that celebrates the strength and spirit of womanhood.

Mary Kom is a remarkable example of a woman who has carved her identity through relentless hard work and determination. Her autobiography, *Unbreakable* (2013), traces her journey from humble beginnings in a small village in Manipur to her historic appearance at the 2012 London Olympics. Born into a family that relied primarily on farming, Mary Kom's early life was shaped by hardship, where balancing education with housework and farm duties was a daily struggle—a reality familiar to many young girls in rural India.

The book details her discovery of boxing as a passion, her initial training experiences, and the many challenges she faced—not just in the ring, but also outside it. Mary Kom candidly discusses the politics and bureaucracy within the sports administration at both state and national levels, which often made her journey more difficult. Despite these obstacles, her perseverance never faltered. A key source of strength in her life was her close friend, who later became her husband and who stood by her through every stage of her career, offering unwavering support. *Unbreakable* is not just a personal narrative of sporting success, but also a powerful account of resilience, love and the quiet strength that defines so many women's lives.

For many women in India, life is often defined by struggle—struggling to pursue their dreams, asserting their rights and navigating the challenges of daily survival. Despite these hurdles, what distinguishes many women is their remarkable resilience and unwavering determination. They face adversity not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity to prove their strength and resolve. This resilience is not only about survival; it is about actively challenging the societal norms that limit their potential and pushing through barriers to achieve their goals. Whether in the realms of education, career, or personal freedom, these women embody the spirit of perseverance that refuses to let struggle define their future. Their stories are a testament to the transformative power of grit and determination, often resulting in profound societal change and personal empowerment.

The film *Saina*, starring Parineeti Chopra as the Indian badminton champion Saina Nehwal, highlights the remarkable highs and lows of Nehwal's career. It serves as a celebration of her perseverance and resilience, emphasizing that champions are not born overnight—they are made through dedication, hard work and overcoming numerous challenges. Born to Usha and Harvir Singh Nehwal, a couple from Haryana residing in Hyderabad, Saina made history in 2015 by becoming the first Indian woman and only the second Indian player after Prakash Padukone to achieve the world No. 1 ranking in badminton.

Saina's career has been marked by a series of groundbreaking achievements. She reached a career-high ranking of world No. 2 in 2010 and 2012 and made history at the London Olympics by becoming the first Indian to win a medal in badminton. Her rise to prominence began when she captured the under-19 national championship title and continued as she became the only player to win the Indian chapter of the prestigious Asian Satellite Badminton Tournament twice. In recognition of her exceptional contributions to Indian sports, Saina has been honored with the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna award and the Padma Bhushan, cementing her legacy as one of India's greatest athletes.

Saina Nehwal's *Playing to Win* (2012) is an inspiring autobiography by one of India's most accomplished badminton players, who brought international acclaim to the country by winning an Olympic medal at the age of twenty-two. Ranked as high as World No. 4 and a recipient of prestigious awards such as the Padma Shri and Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna, Saina's memoir offers an intimate account of her journey from humble beginnings to becoming a global sports icon.

In this candid reflection, Saina takes readers through her childhood and formative years, sharing the influences of key people in her life and the emotional and physical challenges she faced along the way. The book highlights the many sacrifices required to excel in a demanding sport like badminton, from district-level competitions to representing India at the Olympics. Beyond her athletic career, Saina also reveals lesser-known aspects of her personality, offering a glimpse into her roles as a daughter, sister, and student, showing the human side of the celebrated sportswoman. Her memoir not only chronicles her achievements but also underscores the determination, discipline, and resilience needed to succeed at the highest level.

Dangal (2016), directed by Nitesh Tiwari and written by Piyush Gupta, Shreyas Jain, and Nikhil Mehrotra, is a biographical sports drama based on the life of the Phogat family. The film chronicles the journey of Mahavir Singh Phogat, an amateur wrestler and coach, portrayed by Aamir Khan, who trains his daughters, Geeta Phogat and Babita Kumari, to become India's first world-class female wrestlers.

Dangal highlights the challenges the Phogat sisters faced as they broke gender norms in a male-dominated sport. The adult versions of Geeta and Babita are played by Fatima Sana Shaikh and Sanya Malhotra, respectively, while the younger versions of the sisters are portrayed by Zaira Wasim and Suhani Bhatnagar. The film not only showcases the sisters' physical and emotional struggles but also the determination of their father, who defies societal expectations to ensure they receive the training needed to compete at the highest level. *Dangal* serves as a powerful narrative about resilience, gender equality, and the transformative impact of sports in changing societal attitudes.

Akhada: The Authorized Biography of Mahavir Singh Phogat (2016), written by Surabh Duggal, offers a detailed account of the life and journey of Mahavir Singh Phogat, a man who defied societal norms in Haryana, a state notorious for its high rates of female foeticide and infanticide. In a region where gender-based discrimination was deeply entrenched, Mahavir Phogat challenged the belief that wrestling was a sport exclusively for men. He took it upon himself to coach his daughters, Geeta and Babita, in a sport traditionally reserved for boys, thus breaking societal barriers and transforming the landscape of Indian wrestling, both nationally and globally.

Despite facing criticism for unconventional practices, such as trimming his daughters' hair and insisting they wear shorts for training, Mahavir remained committed to his daughters' dreams. These choices, though controversial, were a part of his larger vision to create strong, confident female athletes who could compete on the world stage. His persistence and dedication in the face of adversity not only reshaped the perception of women's participation in wrestling but also highlighted the broader issue of gender equality in Indian society.

Despite their remarkable achievements and international acclaim, female athletes like Serena Williams, Sania Mirza, and M.C. Mary Kom often face skepticism rooted in societal biases and gender stereotypes as well as societal pressure once they become mothers. The moment these women take on the role of motherhood, their ability to compete at the highest level is questioned. However, what sets these athletes apart is their resilience in the face of such challenges. They have navigated the psychological pressures of balancing motherhood and professional sports, ultimately returning to their respective fields and reclaiming their positions as champions.

The film *Panga* (2020), directed by Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari, draws inspiration from the real-life story of a national-level kabaddi champion. The movie follows Jaya, portrayed by Kangana Ranaut, a former kabaddi star who dreams of making a comeback to the sport after taking a break to focus on family life. *Panga* beautifully captures Jaya's internal and external struggles, including societal expectations and personal doubts, as she seeks to re-enter the sport she loves. Through Jaya's journey, the film highlights the broader narrative of women athletes who, despite facing significant life challenges, continue to strive for excellence and break barriers.

Panga is a heartfelt tribute to every woman who dares to dream and every mother who is striving for a second chance. The narrative unfolds as Jaya navigates the challenges of her family life, including the expectations placed on her as a mother. However, it is through the unwavering support of her husband, Jassie and her son that she finds the strength and motivation to make a powerful comeback to the sport. The film beautifully captures Jaya's journey of rediscovery and resilience, shedding light on the sacrifices women often make and the courage required to pursue their passions even after significant life changes.

Conclusion

Today, the prominence of women in the film industry is not only evident in front of the camera but also in the technical aspects of filmmaking. Women have steadily broken barriers in areas traditionally dominated by men, such as directing, cinematography, sound engineering, editing, and production. The increasing presence of women in these roles is reshaping the film industry, leading to more diverse and innovative perspectives in the creation of films.

One notable example is Zoya Akhtar, a renowned Indian film director, screenwriter, and producer, who has made significant contributions to Indian cinema with films like *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) and *Gully Boy* (2019). Her work highlights the complexity of modern relationships and urban life, offering fresh, nuanced narratives. Another example is Meghna Gulzar, a celebrated director and writer, who has received critical acclaim for films like *Raazi* (2018) and *Talvar* (2015), both of which showcase her ability to handle intense and sensitive subject matter with finesse.

In the realm of cinematography, Raghuvir Sahi, one of India's few female cinematographers, is helping to bring new dimensions to visual storytelling, often incorporating a fresh and bold aesthetic. Women like Deepa Mehta, who directed the internationally acclaimed *Water* (2005) and the *Elements Trilogy*, have also made profound impacts by handling difficult and controversial subjects with depth and sensitivity, often sparking important social conversations.

Furthermore, Pooja Ladha Surti, a notable Indian film editor, has worked on multiple critically acclaimed films, demonstrating how women are reshaping the editing room with a distinct touch that elevates storytelling. Similarly, women sound engineers and technicians like Shubhada Joshi, whose work has contributed to multiple award-winning films, are playing key roles in perfecting the sound design of movies. An often overlooked yet vital area where women have made a mark is in stunt performance. Pioneers like Reshma Pathan, known as India's first stuntwoman, paved the way by performing daring stunts in classics like *Sholay*. Geeta Tandon has doubled for numerous leading actresses, executing high-risk sequences in films such as *Chennai Express* and *Raazi*. Sanober Pardiwalla, with a career spanning over 145 films, has performed stunts in air, underwater, and on land, showcasing remarkable versatility. These women face the dual challenge of battling gender stereotypes in a male-dominated field while undertaking some of the most dangerous tasks in filmmaking. Their contributions speak to the courage and resilience of women working behind the scenes, further redefining traditional notions of femininity in cinema.

This growing trend of women taking on roles traditionally reserved for men not only enhances the richness of storytelling but also brings a diversity of thought, perspectives, and ideas that were previously underrepresented. Women are no longer just participants in the industry; they are key decision-makers, creators, and innovators. Their contributions signify a broader societal shift towards gender equality, not just in the realm of cinema but in all creative and professional fields. According to Aysha Viswamohan, "Contemporary Indian cinema, particularly from 2010 onwards, has projected and represented women on screen not just in films and TV but also on new media platforms like OTT and other digital media" (14).

In conclusion, the rising influence of women in the technical aspects of filmmaking marks a significant shift towards a more inclusive and dynamic industry. In all these ways, women are not only changing the narrative in front of the camera but are also playing crucial roles in shaping the film industry from within. Their growing involvement at every level of filmmaking signals a significant shift towards a more inclusive, equitable, and representative cinematic space. This evolution not only paves the way for future generations of women to take up leadership roles but also ensures that stories from diverse viewpoints continue to shape and enrich the global cinematic landscape.

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