



Representation of Women in Female-Directed Bollywood Films



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Abstract

Cinema is a medium through which culture is reflected, ideas are shared, and global perspectives are embraced. Bollywood — a portmanteau of Hollywood and the Indian city “Bombay” — effortlessly embodies this principle; very little rivals Bollywood’s cultural influence on South Asia at large. Within Bollywood’s cultural repository, however, exists longstanding patriarchal traditions that contemporary Indian female directors are seeking to dismantle. These women’s fresh perspectives and personal connections to female representation allow them to utilize their art to bridge the gap between centuries’ worth of gender-based discrimination and more modern steps being taken toward deconstructing inequitable representation.

Introduction

This project aims to uncover female Bollywood directors’ attempts at humanizing their female characters. Surveys were completed on each speaking female character in 20+ female-directed Bollywood movies. This preliminary research points out that while some characters are more equitably portrayed, many directors continue to rely on outdated gender tropes and limit the emotional range of women on-screen.

Methods

Speaking female characters were analyzed through a multitude of lenses, which included but were not limited to their personalities, attire choices, religious affiliations, depictions of modesty (or lack thereof), and tendencies to uphold gender norms and traditions in personal, professional, and social contexts. The relationships the female characters had with each other were similarly noted. Whether they actively supported or discouraged their female peers was taken into account.

Findings were compared and cross-referenced, so as to guarantee that all elements of the film were covered. Results were entered into a database that compares female characterization across 20+ different female-directed Bollywood films. Given the preliminary nature of this research, more films will be watched, surveyed, and analyzed to find more data in the coming years.

Effects of Class on Taboo Behavior and Social Treatment

Taboo Behavior by Class



Positive Effects Behavior by Class (# of characters)



Results

In the case of any taboo behavior, upper and upper middle women engage more regularly in these behaviors than their lower class counterparts. Some taboo behaviors, such as divorce, eloping, and public sex are practiced solely by upper class women. The only taboo behavior that lower class women hold the majority in is pregnancy outside of marriage. This pattern is reflected in the positive social effects experienced by female characters. Upper and upper middle class women experience more appreciation, acceptance, social approval, and personal satisfaction, though it's notable that middle class women have comparable instances of winning the love interest and experiencing a happy ever after story.

Conclusion

This preliminary research suggests that female Bollywood directors continue to deploy some of the characterization techniques that predate their entrance into the world of directing. Largely restricting certain taboo behaviors along class lines bespeaks the perseverance of class-based bias in film. The same can be said about certain degrees of social approval being limited to people of certain classes. Although female directors know firsthand how biased filmmaking impacts the people that are inaccurately represented, there has yet to be a large-scale change in these portrayals. This is not to say that change has not occurred; countless female Bollywood directors have managed to subvert gender and class stereotypes with their works, and their endeavors are represented within the research. Cinema is a reflection of reality, and so these portrayals do ultimately demonstrate the way bias bleeds into artistic expression.

References

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