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### Women-Centric Films in India

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**Abstract:** This study examines Hindi language women-centric parallel and middle cinema films produced in India in which women have resisted injustice. We find that such representations of women, particularly in a male-dominated society, encourage social change by fostering open discussion of taboo subjects such as domestic violence and rape. Such images serve as an alternative to the controlling images (Collins, 2000) that are pervasive in commercial Indian film.

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## **WOMEN-CENTRIC FILMS IN INDIA**

India is a male-dominated society (Gupta, 2003) where women are prohibited from decision-making in most matters. They are under the control of their parents before marriage and their husbands afterward (Chakrapani and Kumar, 1994). Sons receive preferential treatment from birth (Kishor, 1993). Demographic trends and a sex ratio of 918 females to 1,000 males serve as evidence of a preference for sons (Kishor and Gupta, 2009). Girls are routinely deprived of basic nutrition, health care, and educational and employment opportunities and are raised to devote themselves to their husbands (Gupta, 2003).

The Indian Constitution conferred equal rights for women in 1950. Before that, a number of laws related to maternity benefits, inheritance, divorce, equal wages, and action against domestic violence were passed post-independence (achieved in 1947) (Chakrapani and Kumar, 1994). Despite legislative progress, Indian women remain secondary to men (Chakrapani and Kumar, 1994). They are victims of domestic violence, harassment at work, dowry death, rape, and sexual abuse (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2013-as cited in Jadhav, 2015) and are less likely than men to be employed, earning 75 percent of men's wages when they do hold jobs (Jadhav, 2015).

## **WOMEN IN COMMERCIAL INDIAN FILMS**

This unequal treatment is reflected in the commercial film industry (Ganti, 2004), where women work primarily as actresses or playback singers. Only recently have they achieved work as choreographers, costume designers, editors, and screenwriters. "Films are one of the great storehouses of society's stereotypes about women" (Blewett, 1974, 12), and Indian commercial films are rife with androcentric biases (Nandkumar, 2011). Our goal in this paper is to analyze

feminist resistance to patriarchal ideals through alternative "parallel" and "middle" cinematic Hindi language Indian films.

Men who watch commercial Indian movies tend to hold more patriarchal values (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005) with cinema playing an essential role in shaping views about gender (Bagchi, 1996; Ram, 2002) and reflecting and reinforcing the *status quo* (Dasgupta, 1996). Family melodrama and well-choreographed song and dance routines are the essence of commercial Indian films (Acharya, 2004). They portray the ideal woman as submissive, self-sacrificing, (Dasgupta and Hegde, 1988) and accepting of the injustice and violence meted out by men (Dasgupta, 1996). "Bad women" are characterized as hedonistic, sexually aggressive, and westernized. Women are objectified, commonly playing the hero's love interest (Nandkumar, 2011), and violence against women is a standard component of commercial cinema (Dasgupta and Hegde, 1988- as cited in Ghadially, 2007). Such mainstream portrayals convey controlling images that are similar to the ways that African American women have been presented in western media (Collins, 2000). Controlling images both reflect and shape hegemonic ideas of women's value and place in society.

## **Gender and the Influence of Hollywood Films**

In a classical work on the portrayal of women in Hollywood films, Blewett (1974) reported that women were portrayed as long-suffering, tolerant victims. Successful Hollywood films continue to depict women as focused on romance and the pursuit of marriage, submissive to and dependent on men, weak, gentle, passive, overly emotional, and as primary care-givers with little identity of their own (Powers, et. al. 1996; Wood 1994; Liddy, 2015). Hollywood places more emphasis on women's

sexuality, demeanor, and appearance than on their accomplishments or intelligence (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995; Signorielli, 1989; Fischer, 2010). Happiness and sadness are stereotyped as women's emotional expressions (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995; Kelly & Hutson 1999) while men are portrayed as tough, successful, aggressive, competitive, (Calvert et al., 2001), independent, and intelligent (Signorielli, 1990). The only emotion men typically express on screen is anger, and they are showed as being responsible for protecting women (Calvert et al., 2001).

In 1992 the Indian government changed its policy on imported films (Policy for Import of 2002), leading to an increase in the number of Hollywood films in India (Desai, 2000- as cited in Desai, 2005). In a phenomenon known as hybridity (Appadurai, 1996), "Bollywood" commercial filmmakers adopted the Hollywood blockbuster formula adding Indian touches (Acharya, 2004). Hollywood influenced various aspects of Bollywood films, such as choreography, music, photography, costumes, make-up, and hairstyles (Sherafat, 2014). This influence reached a peak in the 1990s and has remained at that level in the present era of globalization (Sherafat, 2014). The manner in which Bollywood films portray female sexuality through the bodies of actresses is an attempt to balance a fine line between Westernization and traditionalism (Sherafat, 2014).

Despite the roles they play, Bollywood actresses must be beautiful, sensual, and young with fair skin (Pendakur, 2003). They often dance sensuously in tribal dresses or wet saris to cater to men's erotic fantasies (Pendakur, 2003; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004; Nandkumar, 2011). Most Indian actresses start their careers as teenagers and are considered old by their late-twenties while men's careers go into

their fifties (Ghanti, 2004; Nandkumar, 2011). Moreover, male actors are better paid than their female counterparts (Pendakur, 2003).

Female Bollywood characters tend to fall into the "Madonna/Whore" complex (Nandkumar, 2011, p. 33-34). Women usually play the role of dutiful daughter, submissive wife, or self-sacrificing mother (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). When they violate social expectations, they are characterized as vamps showing disrespect for traditional values by emulating western women. They drink, smoke, visit nightclubs, are promiscuous, and need to be punished (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 2004, p. 79). Following the theoretical conclusions of Collins, we believe these controlling images have an impact on the ways that women see themselves and how other viewers perceive them. Thus, alternatives have the potential to raise women's consciousness of their own possibilities and to challenge patriarchal ideas about women and their place in society.

### **Parallel Cinema**

The blockbuster formula and controlling images described above were first challenged in the 1960s by a new genre of film known as "parallel cinema" (Pendakur, 2003). During the 1960s, numerous women's issues came to the forefront of Indian society. This encouraged producers and directors of independent film to focus on social problems and the social injustices Indian women experience (Das Gupta, 1983; Fay, 2011; Sheraft, 2014). India's Film Finance Corporation (FFC), now known as the National Film Development Corporation, was founded in 1960 to grant low-interest loans to first-time directors with low-budget films (Gopalan, 2009). Independent film was further championed in 1971 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi when the government granted loans to avant-garde

filmmakers to raise awareness of social problems (Gopalan, 2009).

Parallel films are produced and directed by scholars of the problems of Indian society (DasGupta, 1983). Their goal is to raise awareness (Vasudev & Lenglet, 1983; Fay, 2011) including the oppression of women (Gokulsing & Dissnayake, 2004). These films are primarily gynocentric, but feminist critics argue that films directed by even the most liberal men present a patriarchal bias (Gokulsing & Dissnayake, 2004). The artistic purity of parallel films made them unpopular, a fact that was exacerbated by the FFC's failure to establish distribution channels for its clients (Gopalan, 2009; Krishen, 1991; Rajadhyaksha, 1996). Parallel film production was hard to maintain (DasGupta, 1983), and the genre only survived a decade (Rahman, 1987). Despite their limited success, parallel films raised awareness of controversial issues (Gokulsing & Dissnayake, 2004).

### **Middle Cinema**

Financial difficulties and the moral outrage provoked by parallel films led some directors to take a more commercial approach in a genre known as "middle cinema," which emerged in the late 1970s with continued success into the 1980s (Gopalan, 2009; Pendakur, 2003). Middle cinema appealed to middle-class artistic sensibilities diluted with escapist commercial trappings (Raina, 1986; Gokulsing & Dissnayake, 2004). As the genre developed, audiences expanded and directors aimed to transform the Bollywood formula into aesthetic art that would raise awareness of social problems. Middle cinema films have elements of glamor, a great storyline, and perfect production values as compared to the drab filming techniques of parallel cinema. They have been criticized for using women's sexuality

to portray problems women encounter, having a mundane cinematic design, and failing to present women's issues accurately (Raina, 1986; Tere, 2012), though others argue that middle cinema portrays women's predicaments with more sensitivity than Bollywood films (Tere, 2012).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A key concept in feminist film theory is the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975-as cited in Mulvey, 1989). Based on Freudian theory, female characters play an ornamental role that is a source of male pleasure (Mulvey, 1989, p. 1). Accordingly, femininity arises out of a critical course of parallel development between the sexes, with femininity juxtaposed with masculinity resulting in "active males" and "passive females" (Mulvey, 1989). Most Hollywood movies cater to masculine pleasure where male audience members can engage in the scopophilic observation of female characters (Mulvey, 1975-as cited in Mulvey 1989). Movie theaters showing Hollywood films create settings where audience members are detached from one another in their voyeuristic fantasies (Mulvey, 1975-as cited in Mulvey, 1989), and spectators are situated in a closed relationship that keeps them from contradictory images (Smelik, 1999; Cook, 2004).

Numerous Indian feminist film critics draw on Mulvey's analysis and theorize Indian commercial cinema, arguing that the female body is the main object of focus with women typecast as objects who abide by patriarchal rules (Derne, 2000; Cook, 2004). Western commercial films are visually pleasing, with women commonly portrayed the way men enjoy seeing them (Mulvey, 1989). The main function is to encourage male erotic contemplation with women satisfying the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). Female characters comprise a very small percent of those seen in top-grossing

Hollywood films and women are still treated as second-class citizens in Hollywood (Media Report to Women, Fall, 2015). A recent study on the one hundred top-grossing U.S. films reports that female characters rarely drive screen narratives (Lauzen, 2015 –as cited in Liddy, 2015).

Some feminist scholars consider mass media to be a powerful agent of gender socialization in which male dominance is supported by the portrayal of women as objects (Dasgupta & Hedge, 1988). Parallel film makers argue that film has the potential to create social awareness and change (Hayward, 2000). Traditionally, language represents the feminine as illogical and inferior to masculinity, but disobeying semantic norms enables a change in the existing use and power of language (Krivesta, 1984). Feminist films focus on discontinuities, disrupt traditional signs, and provide a theoretical advance in investigating language and the production of meaning (Mulvey 1989, p.122).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, British feminists broadened their analysis of film by examining it within historical and social contexts of reception (Hayward, 2000). This approach expanded the discussion of spectatorship and reestablished questions of class that had been overshadowed by a singular focus on gender (Hayward, 2000). Still, theories did not address the problem of defining femininity in relation to masculinity, with women as “the other” (de Beauvoir, 2015). British feminists studied the influence of class, gender, race, and the structure of power and resistance, whereas the American feminists and cultural studies experts were influenced by Foucault (Hayward, 2000) who argues that technology is a combination of power (*technos*) and knowledge (*logos*) in a discourse of power (Foucault, 1977). Because power is discursive (Foucault, 1977), where there is power, there is also

resistance, or counter-investment (Foucault, 1977), which leaves its traces despite being separated by social and institutional strata. Feminist films create a form of counter-investment (Hayward, 2000). Feminist theorists argue that social relations of power within the industry and its various players are just as influenced by existing assumptions about gender, race, and class as are film spectators. Audiences are the products of an ideological apparatus, but actively participate in (re)creating reality while watching films. They perceive film differently according to age, sex, gender, class, race, and other factors (Hayward, 2000). This Foucauldian analysis allowed feminist film theorists to theorize femininity without juxtaposing it against masculinity allowing a pluralistic position (Hayward, 2000). But they are not without their critics. Black, Asian, and Latina feminists have criticized the narrow scope of theories that deal only with the social and cultural experiences of white middle-class women. Despite an increase in the number of Black and other non-white female characters, their presence has been largely theoretically overlooked (but see Collins, 2000; Hayward, 2000).

Collins (2000) examined the presentation of Black women in western media and found that they tended to be portrayed stereotypically in what she calls “controlling images.” She argues that portraying African American women as “Mammies,” “Hoochie-Mamas, and “Welfare Queens,” among other images, has been crucial to the political economy of domination encouraging Black women’s oppression. At the base of these controlling images lie stereotypes about African American women’s sexuality, which is presented as either asexual or hypersexual (Foster, 2009). Collins (2000), argues that Matriarchs are presented as “overly aggressive,” unfeminine women

[who]...emasculate their lovers and husbands” (p. 145) while Jezebels and Hoochie-Mamas are stereotyped as whores and sexually aggressive women (p. 147). (See also Harris-Perry, 2011; Herro, 2015). Collins argues that these “controlling images” set a tone for how people think about Black women and how they are portrayed in the fashion and media industries (popular culture) affecting Black women’s consciousness and the notion of beauty (Foster, 2009). In this study, we draw on the idea of “controlling images” to suggest that Bollywood creates an image of submissive women while the alternative films that we analyzed in this project challenge them to varying degrees.

Feminist theory is enhanced by critical theory that argues that popular culture diminishes the ability for negative/critical thinking, reduces political consciousness and activism, and markets goods in ways that encourage consumers to associate products with certain lifestyles and community (Marcuse, 1964; Adorno, 2001). Rather than producing a more refined or difficult art form, the culture industry creates a mass of degraded and idealistic products that discourage consumers from raising questions about political and social issues and fosters a desire for “false needs” where monetary value is attached to any form of social and cultural experience (Adorno, 2001). As a result, consumers believe their lives will be enhanced if they purchase goods they do not otherwise need. The commodification of consumer goods and cultural products has become a global phenomenon. Globalization is enhanced by the ease of communication and the simple transfer of capital and goods made possible by technological developments of the twentieth century (Acharya, 2004). Globalization connects numerous locations into networks that are complex and often contradictory (Desai 2004, p.15). This

process has affected filmmaking in India (Acharya, 2004) with Hollywood bringing about the “Bollywoodization of Indian cinema” (Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willemen, 2014; Acharya, 2004; Rao 2007), which appeals to Indians in India and those settled throughout diaspora (Rao, 2007).

Bollywood is a significant aspect of the global culture industry. Hindi films have figured in the top ten movies of the United Kingdom and the United States. Song and dance sequences have been incorporated into Bollywood films that seldom have any relation to the storyline. Scenes portray erotic dancing by scantily dressed women (Rao, 2007) and include American hip-hop, pop music, and salsa-inspired numbers which further titillate audience members and cater to voyeuristic sexuality (Pendakur, 2003). This “hybrid” combination of east and west results in music and films that cater to orthodox as well as contemporary tastes (Datta, 2000). Hybridity is a combination of social conformism, forced assimilation, self-dejection, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence that combines the culture of both the place of origin and the places where audiences live (Datta, 2000). These theories have been influenced by popular cultural theory.

Gans (1979) provides three major categories of culture: highbrow, middle brow, and low brow. Highbrow culture is synonymous with the tastes of the educated and “cultured” group. Lowbrow refers to the tastes of the uneducated working class, which is also known as “popular,” “taste,” and/or “mass culture.” Middlebrow lies on a continuum between high and low brow culture. Popular (i.e., low brow) culture has a major impact on society, which is influenced by the demands of viewers (Gans and Phillips, 1979). Experts believe that popular culture was created by a group of profit-minded businessmen, who borrowed the high culture’s ideas and debased them to

cater to the entertainment needs of the masses for money—thereby, resulting in an adverse effect on high culture (Gans and Phillips, 1979), an argument similar to that of Adorno (1991—as cited in Adorno, 2001).

Despite the globalization of the culture industry and its efforts to produce films that support the status quo of gender relations, a feminist alternative film industry has existed in India since the 1960s. The academic literature has yet to examine those women-centric movies where women have stood up against atrocities. We aim to address that void in the literature.

## **METHODS**

We used ethnographic content analysis (ECA) (Altheide, 1987—as cited in Altheide, 1996) to analyze Hindi language films where women resist unjust treatment. ECA involves the constant discovery and “comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances” (Altheide, 1987—as cited in Altheide, 1996). It is a combination of content analysis and grounded theory, designed so that researchers start with coding schemes but are flexible and keep adding new themes as they emerge (Charmaz, 2014). This method is appropriate for this study because it allowed us to develop detailed and critical insights into the beliefs portrayed in the films. We analyzed the ways in which these films challenged controlling images (Collins, 2000) of Indian women and the

unequal distribution of power (Gitlin, 1979). We used a purposive sampling method to select women-centric Hindi language films that depicted some of the social problems Indian women endure. Out of a list of forty-six full-length films dealing with women’s issues produced between 1980 and 2011, we selected nine, for a sample of about 20 percent (See Table 1). Our sample includes films from parallel and middle cinema that were selected if female characters solved their own problems rather than relying on men, and depicted women’s agency and subjectivity with main characters having desires of their own and the capacity to express their opinions. We chose films that focused on women from various social classes and sampled only Hindi-language films because neither author was fluent in regional languages. Finally, the movies we sampled represent the issues that emerged in our inductive analysis pertaining to numerous social problems common to women in Indian society. However, characters’ solutions were not representative of Indian culture. The women portrayed in the films we sampled conveyed an “eye-for-an-eye” form of justice by inflicting emotional and physical pain on their wrongdoers. We analyzed parallel and middle films from their heydays through their demise, with an analysis of factors that may have contributed to the decline in their popularity.

**Table 1: Movies selected for this study.**

Serial Number	Release Year	Title of The Movie	Director	Plot Synopsis
15	1983	Arth	Bhatt	Unfaithful spouse.
24	1988	Zakahmi Aurat	Bhopal	Violence and rape
29	1995	Bandit Queen	Kapur	Rape, Caste system, Child marriage.
32	1998	Fire	Mehta	Homosexuality and infidelity
35	2001	Daman	Lajami	Domestic violence
36	2001	Lajja	Santoshi	Dowry, violence, pre-marital pregnancy, abortion and single mother.
40	2005	Water	Metha	Widow prostitution and child marriage
42	2006	Chingaari	Lajmi	Prostitution and violence.
45	2011	Saat Khun Maaf	Bharadwaj	Marital problems.

The films were about three hours long with both male and female directors. With some notable exceptions, most actresses were either starting out in film or had careers that were fading due to age. Most older actresses were striving for critical acclaim. The fact that most of the films in this genre did not perform well at the box office indicates that they were neither widely accepted in Indian society nor

a key part of popular culture. Although these movies have received many prestigious awards, they were commercially unsuccessful.

The first author, who is fluent in Hindi, watched each film numerous times to see how women dealt with various unfavorable situations. While watching the films, she noted whether they followed a formula similar to commercial Bollywood

films and used the academic literature to provide “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer, 1954-as cited in Bowen, 2006), a device that marks the starting point for a qualitative study (Glaser 1978, 1998). Once she had watched and made notes on all the films, she used a comparative method to analyze the similarities and differences between middle and parallel films and those directed by women and men. She further analyzed the use of narrative and semantics and the places they contradicted each other. She also considered funding sources, dialogue, background music, and the portion of the movies that portrayed violence against women who stood up for themselves, and noted the theme of each of film. The relationship between the main female character and other actors was our primary focus of analysis. Many of the films in this study were true or inspired by true stories.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Following the literature on Indian film, we first categorized the movies according to the features that signified them as parallel or middle films. The following is a summary of the plot of each:

### Parallel Films

***Arth*** (*The Meaning*) portrays Pooja (Shabana Azami), an educated, middle-class woman who leaves her husband because of his infidelity. Unlike usual films, she refuses to reconcile with her husband or marry her best friend. Instead, she concentrates on raising her maid-servant’s daughter and her job.

***The Bandit Queen*** is based on a true story. Phoolan Devi (Seema Biswas) belongs to a poor lower caste family who joins a group of robbers to avenge the ill-treatments she faced throughout her life from higher-caste men.

***Fire*** - The first Indian film to focus on lesbianism. Two sisters-in-law, Radha

(Sabana Azami) and Sita (Nandita Das), are married to two brothers who abuse them. They find true companionship and a romantic relationship with each other.

***Daman*** (*Oppression*) Durga (Raveena Tandon), a victim of chronic domestic violence, kills her husband to save their daughter from getting married to an old man.

***Water*** focuses on widow prostitution in widow homes before Indian independence. Kalyani (Lisa Ray), a young widow prostitute, commits suicide. Therefore, the ashram owner starts negotiating Chuiya’s (a child widow) rate. On coming to know this, Shankuntala, an older widow, escapes with Chuiya and entrusts her to Narayan’s (a man living his life on Gandhian principles’) for better upbringing.

### Middle Cinema:

***Zakmi Aurt*** (*Wounded Woman*) Kiran Dutt (Dimple Kapadia), a police officer by profession, is gang-raped. She forms a sorority comprising rape survivors and their family members in order to take vengeance on their perpetrators.

***Lajja*** (*Shame*). While running to save herself from her abusive husband, Vahedehi (Manisha Koirala) comes in contact with three women: Maithili, Ramdulaari, and Janki. These women are victims of various plights that women in India face. These women resist the ill-treatment meted out to them, despite coming from different economic and social strata.

***Chingaari*** (*The Spark*) is based on the novel, *The Prostitute and the Postman*. It addresses the problems of women, caste norms, purity, and pollution that are still dominant in rural India. It conveys a strong message by showing the central character, Basanti killing the religious head of the village, Bhuvan Panda for murdering her fiancé.

*Saat Khun Maaf* (*Seven Murders Forgiven*) is based on the short story, *Susanna's Seven Husbands*. The plot revolves around an extremely beautiful and wealthy woman named Susanna who marries six times and ends up killing each husband for when each tortures her. In the end, she confesses that Jesus is her only husband as he has never hurt her and will love her despite all her sins.

### **Differences Between Parallel and Middle Cinema.**

In all the films we analyzed, women played the central character. Neither genre portrayed women as passive or as sexual objects for men. Instead, both genres focused on the problems women face in Indian society and portrayed them as actively seeking solutions and/or revenge. These films portrayed women as individuals with desires, opinions, and most importantly, the willingness to stand up for themselves.

There were key differences between parallel and middle cinema films. The films from middle cinema (*Lajja*, *Zakhami Auart*, *Saat Khun Maaf*, and *Chingari*) included commercially-produced, popular music with lyrics likely to appeal to mainstream audiences. The actresses looked as beautiful as they do in commercial movies. They wore designer costumes, jewelry, and flawless makeup. In *Lajja*, all the actresses were draped in colorful designer saris. Similarly, *Zakami Auart* had the actress wearing lovely western and Indian outfits throughout the film. In *Chingari*, the actress plays the role of a poor woman, but her makeup and dress were impeccable. In middle cinema films, all the actresses were famous for their beauty. For example, the actresses of *Chingari* and *Saat Khun Maaf* were also world class models turned actors. All these actresses were known for their beautiful bodies, fair complexion (or were made up to

look light-skinned), and the long hair that is considered attractive and feminine in India.

Songs and dances are major ingredients of popular Hindi cinema. Middle Cinema films had well-written songs and well-choreographed dances, with some of the songs topping the music charts in India even when the film was a commercial flop. These songs were a combination of various genres of music including hip-hop and easy-listening music. Filmmakers hired top-notch choreographers who incorporated various forms of dance to attract Indian audiences. The songs in middle cinema films utilized all the ingredients used by commercial filmmakers, incorporating far more songs and dances than parallel films. Films of middle cinema, unlike parallel films, generally started with the actresses having a romantic relationship until they experienced something that made them take control. These incidents led to an overall change in the perspective of the central character and a major transformation in the storyline and songs.

The film genres also differed by location. Similar to the findings of Dwyer and Patel (2002), middle cinema films were shot at fascinating Indian and foreign locations, providing a sense of escapism. A part of *Lajja* was shot at a very famous film studio in India where many commercial movies are recorded, while other parts were filmed in Hungary. Similarly, *Saat Khun Maaf* was filmed at beautiful locations in India and abroad.

Parallel films (*Daman*, *Arth*, *Fire*, *Water*, and *Bandit Queen*) also focused on the various problems experienced by women in India, but with an entirely different approach. All of these films were shot at drab locations. Actresses used a little makeup, often for a “no makeup” effect, and costumes were simple. In *Water*, the actresses wore plain white saris. Similarly, in *Arth*, Sabana Azami, who played a

middle-class housewife, wore dresses similar to those worn by women of that class. None of the dresses had brand or designer labels. Nandita Das and Sabana Azami, the two actresses in *Fire*, wore no makeup when they were shown doing household chores. Clothing and makeup in parallel films closely represented the appearance of Indian women of the social classes presented in the films. In all parallel movies, tremendous effort was given to authenticity of representation. For instance, the actresses in *Water* shaved their heads completely to portray the widows of that era. Similarly, in *Bandit Queen*, the actresses wore extremely simple costumes. In *Daman*, the gorgeous actress, Raveena Tandon, used minimum makeup except for the scenes where she was getting married. This reality effect was in contrast to middle cinema, where the actresses looked ravishing even when they were being abused or doing housework. Parallel cinema actresses do not qualify as 'conventional' beauties according to Indian standards of beauty. Nandita Das, Smita Patil, Shabana Azami, and Seema Biswas are neither fair nor do they have great figures. Lisa Ray is bi-racial, so her looks do not fit the idea of ideal Indian beauty, as her skin is too pale. Raveena Tandon was considered to be a beautiful actress in her youth, but she worked in *Daman* during the last stage of her career. She had gained weight and wore little make-up which revealed imperfections in her complexion

Depictions of rape and assault in parallel films were very real and difficult to watch compared to those of middle cinema, which were shot more aesthetically. In middle cinema films (mostly by men) a stylized angle was used to capture the facial expressions of rape victims, obscuring women's emotional and physical agony. In parallel films, by contrast, the camera concentrated more on the facial expressions

of actresses, more clearly portraying pain, anguish, and other raw emotions. For instance, in *Arth*, a close-up shot of Pooja's face makes it clear that she abhors a man's attempt to molest her. Veteran parallel film maker Shyam Benegal argues that the way a film is shot and edited reflects the power and position of those making, editing, censoring, and distributing it (Times of India, Sept 12, 2012). Director Shekhar Kapoor was criticized for presenting rape scenes in a brutal manner in his movie *Bandit Queen* (Fay, 2011).

In summary, both genres of film discussed in this section revolve around women-centric issues. However, these films are presented in a different style. Middle films are akin to the presentation of actresses in commercial cinema. Costumes, make-up, and hair of the actresses are given detailed attention, and most of them films have songs and dances similar to those found in commercial films. Middle cinema combines popular appeal and critical acclaim. On the other hand, parallel cinema films present actresses more realistically so that an ordinary woman can identify with them. The costume, make-up, and hair in these films are kept very simple and as realistic as possible. These films seldom have any song and dance sequences, unlike commercial Bollywood films.

### **Differences in Films Directed by Women and Men**

Four out of nine films we analyzed had female directors, with each directing two movies. In those films, female directors portrayed women as more aggressive than their male counterparts. Women directors' story lines discouraged viewers from feeling sorry for female characters and did not resort to psychological rationales for their vengeful actions. Male directors, by contrast, tended to provide more traditional reasons for women's violent actions,

encouraging audience members to rationalize their violent behavior. For instance, in Vishal Bharadwaj's *Saat Khun Maaf*, the narration in the opening scene says that the female (central) character has some psychological insecurity because her parents left her. Hence, she married several times in search of the love she was denied as a child, ultimately killing all her abusive husbands. Thus, viewers are able to rationalize serial murder as the actions of an unbalanced or emotionally deprived woman rather than holding the men she kills accountable for their abuse. We see similar trends in *Lajja*, where the protagonist escapes from her husband, solely to save her unborn child's life, rather than her own. In *Bandit Queen*, the emphasis on the fact that the main character was raped several times creates sympathy for her, rather than evoking anger toward her assailants. Evoking sympathy appears to be a calculated choice made to avoid angering audiences, and especially male audience members, who are the majority of theater goers.

Sympathy toward avenging women neutralizes efforts to challenge controlling images and create social change, making the injustice individual. By contrast, anger conveys a social injustice that can be generalized from one woman's plight to that of all women. Films directed by women (*Chingari*, *Fire*, *Water* and *Daman*) provided realistic depictions of gender and social oppression, potentially creating a vicarious feeling among women in the audience as they identify injustice in their own lives with those of on-screen characters. Women in these films are portrayed as being strong and brave in their efforts to overcome adversity and seek justice. For example, in *Fire* the central characters leave their husbands to live together as partners. Similarly, in *Daman* the gutsy behavior of the wife is applauded as

she runs away with her daughter and later kills her husband.

Movies directed by men had funding from famous producers or production companies, often receiving advertising money from leading commercial brands. Films directed by women were funded by private and government entities. Kalpana Lajmi's *Daman* was funded and distributed by National Development Film Corporation (NDFC), a government program offering much less money than commercial sponsors. This lower level of funding resulted in the producer hiring less-experienced technicians. In addition to being criticized for portraying the central character as aggressive and opinionated, the film was lambasted on technical grounds. Lajmi, angrily addressed these issues in an interview, saying, "It's easy for someone to slash a woman-centric film. They don't see what goes into making a film. And with the kind of budget we get, what do they expect us to make? Even if we get half the money that producers of commercial films get, we can create wonders" (TOI, September 7, 2001). She also complained in another interview, that she had to go through equally difficult situations to manage funds for *Chingaari*, where she worked as the director, story writer, and co-producer of the film. She expressed disgust over her male stars and technicians, who were uncooperative and difficult to manage, which she attributed to them feeling insulted at having to take instructions from a woman. Lajmi had approached numerous male stars, but most refused to work on a female-directed women-centric film (Glamsham Magazine, 2007). Parallel films such as *Arth* and *Bandit Queen* had male directors, whereas the other three films in the same category used for this study, *Fire*, *Daman*, and *Water* had female directors. Films such as *Saat Khun Maaf*, *Zakhmi Auart* and *Lajja* which were included in the middle

cinema category had male directors, and *Chingaari* was a female-directed film. Therefore, after analyzing the findings, it seems that differences are likely to be a combination of the “intersection” of gender and film genre.

In summary, parallel films were usually directed by women, whereas all the middle films had male directors. Parallel films portrayed women as avengers and more aggressive, whereas middle films tried to invoke sympathy amongst the audience for the vengeance of lead characters.

“brow” culture. Specifically, the films analyzed retained a reality effect, portraying women’s issues in a more intense, less entertaining manner, making them more likely to appeal to a limited audience of elites. The act of escaping or avenging is not as easy in reality as it is portrayed onscreen. Women in India, despite legal changes, continue to face social pressures to submit to men and are threatened with stigma and financial insecurity or ruin if they leave or fight back. Although widely criticized and unpopular, these films present crucial challenges to the controlling images of women conveyed in Bollywood film, which depict women as always beautiful and happily subservient and long-suffering.

Middle cinema films meet the criteria of Gans and Phillips (1979) “middle brow” culture due to producers’ use of glitzy and glamorous components from the commercial cinema and the thought-provoking storylines of parallel film. There was a stark contrast between the treatment of protagonists by male and female directors, dependent on the genre. The presentation of women by female directors in parallel films was subversive, and the ill-treatment of those characters evoked anger against social injustice. However, middle cinema films by male directors provoked a sense of pity for woman characters, providing a justification for their avenging

Directors of parallel cinema have complained about various hardships they had to undergo while making a film. The parallel film directors, especially the females directors, spoke out about the troubles they encountered while filming, focusing on a lack of funding and lack of cooperation and respect from male crew members.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on popular culture theory (Gans and Phillips, 1979) it appears that parallel films meet the criteria of “high actions rather than offering commentary about the system. This finding partially supports Adorno’s (1972-as cited in Adorno, 2001) theory that high culture evokes negative or critical thinking, while more popular forms of culture stifle critical thinking. When an entertainment value is introduced, the potential of film to provide a critical commentary on society is diminished, but contrary to Adorno’s theory, its subversive value is not entirely lost. Although middle cinema films depict images of women that have the potential to challenge those of Bollywood and the dominant culture, the potential is subdued when problems are conveyed in psychological and individualistic terms.

Both parallel and middle cinema films challenge stereotypical ideas about women’s obligation to submit to men and to endure suffering without complaint (Rahman, 1988). The concept of women as strong-willed and independent was the brainchild of women-centric cinema, with the motive to challenge the depiction of women that had become an intrinsic part of popular culture. However, films in the category of middle cinema, which mostly had male directors, used a hybrid formula, combining the entertainment value of commercial film with an examination of women’s issues. The result was that middle cinema films tended to water down the

intensity of problems faced by the women that these movies initially wanted to show.

While parallel and middle cinema films draw social attention to women's problems, this focus is not without issue. Media delivers a plethora of information in very little time. The audience on the other hand believes that it has all the necessary information about the issues portrayed (Ono & Pham, 2009), even though they lack the full story and have a distorted view of them (Wilson et al., 2003). Watching parallel films can lead audience members to believe that leaving a violent or unjust situation, while difficult, is more possible than it is. The question then becomes, "Why don't women are dependent on their husbands, was banned (Tripathy 1988-as cited in Dasgupta, 1996). The question remains whether middle cinema's portrayal of resistance to the dominant culture is overt and clear or partial and fractured. The possible answer can be found by placing this analysis into de Certeau's (1984) concept of tactics, by which the culture industry (i.e., the films) is a more commercial conduit to convey counter-cultural messages. Unlike parallel film, which appeals primarily to a very narrow and elite audience, middle cinema uses elements of commercial film to attract larger audiences. De Certeau argues that such tactics, "...make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers. It poaches them. It creates surprises in them....It is a guileful ruse" (Alvermann, 2002, p. 37). Middle cinema uses the framework of commercial cinema while presenting messages about women who dare to show resistance, thereby challenging the portrayal of women as depicted by dominant popular culture. However, the entertainment factor of commercial cinema used by middle cinema has a detrimental effect on the social commentary about the status of women in the Indian society. The message is

women leave abusive situations?" rather than, "What can society do to stop violence and other forms of injustice?" Further, women in the audience who may endure similar situations may relate to on-screen characters (see Mulvey, 1975-as cited in Mulvey, 1989) but, seeing the difficulties characters face in trying to solve their problems, women in the audience may believe real change is not an option for them.

It appears that women-centric films have had an effect on the censor board. In 1988, the release of the film '*Pati Parmaeshwar*' (Husband is god), based on the belief that delivered, but in a watered down, commodified fashion (Adorno, 2001) that compromises its subversive potential.

In the end, women-centric films in both genres have the potential to effect social change. Parallel cinema, with its limited audience and realistic portrayal of characters, problems, and issues, has a greater potential to focus attention on the stark realities women in India live with, but to a narrower audience. Middle cinema has broader appeal but delivers pretty portrayals of women's issues in ways that individualize their problems and divert attention away from the cultural and structural realities they endure and toward entertaining song and dance routines and beautiful actresses, costumes, jewelry, and sets. Both genres have brought to public discourse issues that were once whispered about at best and denied at worst. While imperfect, each genre has the potential to effect social change in Indian society by showing women that resistance is possible and men that women's ability and willingness to tolerate abuse is not infinite.

Given Adorno's (1972-as cited in Adorno, 2001) argument that high-brow (Gans and Phillips, 1979) art has the potential to foster critical thinking, together

with Mulvey's finding that women identify with on-screen actresses while men engage in voyeuristic observation, we believe that despite small audiences and strong protests against many of them, parallel film offers realistic images of women's lives that counter the controlling images (Collins, 2000) of mainstream media (or Bollywood). Although middle cinema films offer less realistic images of women in terms of standards of dress and beauty, they too portray women as resisting oppression and ideals of women as subservient and long-

suffering. Despite small audiences in India, film critics have rewarded these films with accolades that suggest a recognition of the power of film, as a form of high art, to create social change. Efforts at institutional reform on behalf of Indian women has resulted in limited success. A challenge to the phenomenology of oppression (Bartky, 1988) is needed to foster real equality for women in India and throughout the diaspora. Film has the potential to start a necessary dialogue.

## NOTES:

1. Pre-marital pregnancy, unwed mother, and divorce are considered taboo.
2. A woman is expected to serve her husband without protesting against anything.
3. An interview of a veteran parallel and middle film director Shyam Benegal and his views:

[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-09-13/newsinterviews/33816112\\_1\\_film-maker-art-films-indian-cinema](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-09-13/newsinterviews/33816112_1_film-maker-art-films-indian-cinema)

4. b. Kalpana Lajmi on the problems of women directors and her views:

5. [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-09-01/newsinterviews/27239747\\_1\\_kalpana-lajmi-quandary-distributors](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-09-01/newsinterviews/27239747_1_kalpana-lajmi-quandary-distributors)

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