



# Naari Shakti: Redefining Womanhood in Contemporary Bollywood Films

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## Abstract

*This research article analyzes the recent reflection of contemporary Bollywood movies on the portrayal of womanhood using the concept of Naari Shakti, which means women's power and strength. In the past, Bollywood films usually offered women limited and stereotypical roles, viewing them as dependent and relegated to the household. In the post-2010 films, I noticed progressive change in the content of Bollywood films, where women are represented as powerful, liberated, and courageous, challenging the patriarchal ideology and attitude that controlled women. This study evaluates Bollywood films such as Kahani, Thappad, Mardaani 2, and Dangal to show how these movies reflect the socio-cultural changes. It promotes and inspires feminist discourse and women's empowerment not only at the national level but also at the international level. The study deals with topics such as self-identity, agency and empowerment, resistance, and intersectionality, illustrating how the women protagonists wish to reclaim their lives in the context of personal and social challenges. It describes the evolution of women's cinematic voice and presence and analyzes the use of women's narrative techniques and structure in storytelling. Despite Bollywood's present token feminism and objectification of women, the rise of powerful and strong narratives marks a positive turning point. From the analysis, the article concludes with the observation that there is an evolving space in Bollywood for womanhood to be redefined and articulated away from patriarchal frameworks*

**Keywords:** feminism, Naari Shakti, bollywood, womanhood, women empowerment, gender representation

## Introduction

Bollywood movies have for a long time represented the socio-cultural aspects of India. In earlier films, the depiction of women was one of the most biased and simplistic aspects. The female characters were portrayed as devoted mothers, dutiful wives, or loving and self-sacrificing women who existed to champion the male protagonist's journey. Their identities were secondary, framed in relation to the men in their lives, and their aspirations and conflicts were seldom featured in the narrative. The women were mostly voiceless, submissive, and emotionally reliant characters. In the last two decades, however, Indian cinema has evolved. A new generation of

filmmakers, screenwriters, and even actors have transformed the representation of women on screen. Female characters today are no longer mere participants; they occupy the lead roles, influence the story, and determine the overarching themes. They are empowered, driven, and willing to defy conventions. They do not wait for any support but actively control their own destiny, take tough decisions, and fight for justice, respect, and equality. This transformer is not just for entertainment, but it also shifts the societal ideology and mindset. Naari Shakti, meaning "women's power," has been used in political speeches, cultural programs, and social campaigns. It is only now, however, that it resonates



in Bollywood. The concept of Naari Shakti has evolved from being only conceptual and is now a reality that is lived and visually represented in movies. It is now through powerful, well-developed female roles that Bollywood is beginning to redefine womanhood today in India. A woman is no longer someone to obey instructions: she is someone who forges her own path.

This article analyzes the change Bollywood has brought through the lens of four significant films: *Kahaani* (2012), *Dangal* (2016), *Mardaani 2* (2019) and *Thappad* (2020). All of these films make a distinct contribution to the ideas of female strength and empowerment. The film *Thappad*, depicts a woman's agency and voice against domestic violence and recognition surrenders. In the film *Kahaani*, a pregnant woman outsmarts a corrupt system using her intellect as well as emotional strength. The film *Mardaani 2*, features a fearless female police officer who battles the brutal crimes and the paralyzing fear that grips society. In the film *Dangal*, based on a true story of young girls, are shown defying societal expectations to excel in the male-dominated field of sports. Although different in setting and genre, these films share one thing in common: they celebrate the inner strength of women. These films do not present traditional portrayal of women but the evolving perspective of womanhood as powerful, bold, independent, and inspiring. Bollywood plays a crucial role in transforming the image of women on screen as well as off screen and also in prompting gender equality in society.

### **Kahaani (2012): The Power of Intelligence and Inner Strength**

Film *Kahaani*, directed by Sujoy Ghosh, the central figure of the film is Vidhya Bagchi, a pregnant woman who travels alone in search of her missing husband. The film shows the power, courage, and determination of a woman whatever the situation is. She raises her voice against the patriarchal system. This film shows how intelligence can be more powerful than physical power when confronting personal and societal challenges. In a time of uncertainty, Vidhya acts independently of the action

hero convention. She is beautiful, talented, and stylish, but she is not seen as a sex object or lazy or incompetent. She is a capable woman. While capable of great destructive potential, she is nonetheless also capable of constructive change. This film's vision of womanhood is so profound that it can touch all women regardless of differences.

*Main Vidhya Bagchi hoon. Mere husband ko dhoondhne mein aap meri madad karenge?*

*(I am Vidya Bagchi. Will you help me find my husband?)*

This line is the symbol of a deeper, stronger woman beneath, a woman on a mission for justice. Throughout the film, Vidhya outsmarts an entire system, including trained officers and powerful agents. This film is an exemplary feminist work that is more than just a commercially lucrative film. It reveals the weaknesses of a male who believes a woman, especially a pregnant woman, can never take the major step or understand a complex conspiracy. These films show the potential for women's empowerment through liberation from patriarchal expectations. Vidhya Bagchi's representation of womanhood is deeper than just a victim's or an action hero's story. It could inspire women and maybe even men to re-imagine their future, reshape a more positive space to reclaim their identity as women, and remind men of the unique differences between themselves and women. This film redefines the meaning of womanhood in such a way that it highlights the real strength of intelligence, patience, and emotional resilience. In earlier films women played the supporting role, but now women play the main role who are brave, powerful, smart, and intelligent enough to handle any situation.

### **Dangal (2016): Breaking Traditional Barriers**

The film *Dangal*, directed by Nitish Tiwari, is a biographical sports drama based on the true story of Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former wrestler, and his daughters Geeta Phogat and Babita Phogat. In this movie Mahavir Singh Phogat decided to train her daughters in wrestling. It also shows the power of women in male-dominated areas and raise the questions on patriarchy and gender stereotypes,



explores the real meaning of womanhood through the struggle, courage, and determination of women. The story is set in a small village of Haryana. The story begins with Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former wrestler who did not complete his dream to become a wrestler and win a gold medal for his country because of financial support. Like so many fathers, he also wishes for a son who can fulfill his dream, but when he sees his young daughter beat up two local boys in a fight, he recognizes their potential, and at that time he decides to train his daughter in a sport that was considered unfit for women. He also challenged the patriarchy and faced strong criticism from society, who believed that girls belong to the kitchen, not in wrestling, but Mahavir Singh Phogat believed in his daughters and cut their short hair, made them practice hard, and trained them with the same intensity as he would have trained sons. This film promotes gender equality and also becomes the self-inspiration for other women who want to pursue their dreams in sports. The most famous line of this film is when Mahaveer dismantles the patriarchal ideology:

*Mhaari chhoriyaan chhoron se kam hain ke?*

*(Are my daughters any less than boys?)*

This quote directly questions a long-held societal mindset that undervalues the women. This quote is not just dialogue, but it is a cultural statement that resonates deeply with audiences across India.

Through Geeta's or Babita's journey, the film redefines womanhood by showing that femininity is not the opposite of strength. These girls struggle, hard work, fall, and rise just like any other athlete, they do not compromise on their dreams to put into societal expectations and how a woman should behave or look; instead, they prove that women can fight literally and metaphorically.

This film also highlights another aspect of women's empowerment: the role of family support, where the dedication of a father becomes the backbone of his daughter's success, and it can also lead to a strong message about feminist discourse and opportunities and also highlight the need for family support that can break the barriers and turn the impossible things into the possible. This film

highlights the Naari Shakti rebellion but also the strength, discipline, struggle, hard work, and victory in space, which was a restricted area for women. It inspired countless girls in the country, who want to pursue their dreams over the outdated barriers. It proves that gender is not a limitation but a social mindset that can and must be changed.

### **Mardaani 2 (2019): Courage and Justice**

The film *Mardaani 2* was directed by Gopi Puthran. It is a crime thriller drama where Shivani Shivaji Roy, the role played by Rani Mukharjee, is the main character of the story, who is an intelligent, brave, and strong police officer. She is on her mission to catch a young and cruel criminal who target young girls and rape them badly. This movie is not just the story to watch but also sends a strong message to lead justice systems in patriarchal society. Shivani is not represented as a superhero but as a strong and determined woman who balances her personal life and professional life. She represents the real face of Naari Shakti and carries empathy and authority, strength and sensitivity. A strong quote from this film is when Shivani says

Yeh, naya Bharat hai. Yahan tu darr nahi dega, darr feel karega.

*(This is the new India. Here, you won't spread fear—you'll feel fear.*

This quote shows how women have evolved according to time; now they are not scared anymore. The criminal should be afraid now. In film Shivani faces many societal pressures like media pressure, political interference, and skepticism. In spite of these challenges, she never gives up and showcases the real meaning of empowerment through her confidence, strategic intelligence, and justice, also standing up for what is right no matter how dangerous or difficult it may be at the cost of her own life. She raised her voice against sexual harassment. Film depicting a female figure of authority who leads from the front, protects the vulnerable, and demands respect without asking for it. This film highlights the power of women in maledominated areas and also challenges the traditional gender norms that always try to see



women under the four walls of the house. The film sends out a clear message that a woman in uniform is not just a protector but a symbol of fearless justice and strength in the face of evil.

### **Thappad (2020): Questioning Patriarchy and Silent Suffering**

The film *Thappad* is directed by Anubhav Sinha. It is an emotional film that is politically relevant regarding the idea of emotional and physical abuse in the institution of marriage. The story follows Amrita, the sacrificing housewife who feels relatively happy with her life until one moment changes everything. While at a party, Amrita's husband slaps her in an argument, with family and friends in attendance. Amrita felt hurt but did not want to be silent; she raised her voice against domestic violence and decided to take a divorce, but everyone forced her to move on, but she denied.

*"Bas ek thappad. Par, nahi maar sakta."*

This one line sums up the entire film and its intent. It is not about the slap. It is about what this slap represents: the normalization of the disrespect towards women, the dismissal of women's pain, and how women bear the burden of adjustment in relationships. The film explores how society has trained women to disregard emotional pain and forget personal pleasure and happiness to keep up the family image. Amrita's act of leaving the marriage is a subdued, yet effective act of defiance for generations of women who have endured. The film illustrates how society has conditioned women not only to suppress emotional pain but also to prioritize reputation over well-being and their own happiness. Amrita's choice to exit her marriage represents a quieter but nonetheless loud revolt against the generations of women who were taught acceptance. Another powerful moment occurs when Amrita states,

*"Mujhe sab theek karna nahi aata. Mujhe theek hona aata hai."*

There is a repositioning from sacrifice to self-worth. Instead of using loud protests, this film shows women standing up by having the courage to say no. It shows that respect can not be bought or negotiated

and that even one act of violence, whether mental or physical, is enough reason to leave. In a society where it is seen as acceptable for women to make adjustments, this movie becomes the inspiration for emotional fairness, dignity, and self-respect.

### **Contemporary Bollywood as a Mirror of Social Change**

Media play a very important role specially cinema is a very powerful tool in India to bring changes in society because people not only watch movies for entertainment purposes, but they also learn a lot from them what they see on screen; it directly affect that how they feel, behave, and treat others. Bollywood has had the power to shape the public mindset, values, and beliefs for centuries. Bollywood reflects the societal expectation where women were confined and played the traditional roles of dutiful wife, sacrificing mother, and obedient daughter and the supporting character of the story but now finally see progressive portrayal of women, especially in the post-2010 Bollywood films. Bollywood films are not just a form of entertainment but also spread awareness. Now, filmmakers are increasingly creating stories where women do not play the side character or the supporting character of the story but play the main character of the story who raises their voice, breaking barriers, challenging oppression and the patriarchal system.

Filmmakers are crafting those stories where women are not only at the center of the plot but are depicted as independent and dynamic. This shift aligns with the larger movement in society where women raise their voices, breaking outdated barriers and challenging oppressive systems. Through focusing on these issues and realities, Bollywood transforms them into powerful narratives on screen. Films like *Thappad*, *Mardaani 2*, *Kahaani*, and *Dangal* are not just cinematic productions but social commentators that represent the transformed mindset of audiences regarding women. This is a crucial break from the past and plays an important role in shaping societal perceptions and attitudes towards gender roles, especially women. When empowered women are showcased on screen, it can lead to a



positive message about women's respect, dignity, and voice. It begins to normalize these ideas in real life. The transformation of female representation in post-Bollywood 2010 films also reflects the changes and aspirations of women with the greater excess of education, awareness, and careers, so the modern women want to see the story on screen that explores their real-life struggle and strength authentically and not as a token of feminism. Contemporary Bollywood films are responding to the demand with characters who are courageous, independent, and relatable so the audience feels the real-life experience on a screen. Bollywood is not only reflecting the social change but also driving cultural force and equality.

### Conclusion

In the recent year Bollywood has presented a transforming image of women and also addressed the real-life struggles or issues of women on screen. Now, women do not play the side and supporting character of the story but the main and leading character of the story. Their transformation is not limited to the films only, but also see the broader cultural, social, and ideological changes in Indian society. Films like *Kahaani*, *Thappad*, *Mardaani 2*, and *Dangal* have redefined women. These films break the stereotypical barrier that limited women and introduce the transforming image of women in society. The rise of Naari Shakti in Bollywood films reflects the real-life struggles and triumphs of women across the country. It also aligns with the global feminist movement, where women are demanding rights, freedom, and justice. Bollywood has its wide reach and deep influence and has the power to reshape how people think, behave, and treat. When mainstream films showcase women as fearless police officers, determined wives, or individuals walking away from toxic relationships, they promote a positive change sign of a growing movement: Naari Shakti as both a cinematic and cultural force.

This shift is not limited to films only but reflects the collective efforts of directors, writers, and producers to actors who are using digital platforms to

present women's experiences. It also highlights the changing perspective of audiences towards women-centric films and their eagerness to see content that reflects the realities of women. These stories may present multiple themes, tones, and settings, but at their main point they celebrate strength, identity, resilience, and independence. At last, Naari Shakti in contemporary Bollywood is not just a cinematic theme, but it is a movement that promotes woman empowerment and strengthens their identity. It reclaims the space that women deserve on screen as well as off screen. As more stories emerge that challenge the outdated norms and embrace the new. Bollywood continues to evolve into a platform that uplifts, empowers, and celebrates its women. This is not only a shift in storytelling but also a cultural awakening where women are not just characters in stories but the creators of history.

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