

Double-Edged Sword: Unearthing Toxicity in Bollywood's Empowered Female Characters

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Abstract

The representation of women in contemporary Bollywood films has offered valuable insights into the discourse surrounding the feminine sphere. Within the patriarchal framework, critiques of femininity have emerged, advocating for positive depictions of 'strong females.' This study delves into movies featuring empowered female characters, mainly focusing on the analysis of *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi* (1996), *Fukrey* (2013), *Gulaab Gang* (2014), and *Begum Jaan* (2017). Notably, this paper introduces the idea of toxic femininity in Bollywood cinema, contending that female characters exhibit similar 'toxic' features. This notion challenges the discourse critiquing hypermasculine traits and machismo, often addressed by feminist scholars, filmmakers, and female protagonists. The investigation centers on understanding the visual encoding of glorified masculine characteristics evident in on-screen female characters. Additionally, the study explores how body language and choice of profession serve as sites for 'performed' protest by female characters. While such protests are generally viewed and applauded by both genders, the paper posits an alternative viewpoint, suggesting that they are a double-edged sword, undermining positive communication between the sexes.

Keywords: Bollywood; empowerment; double-edged sword; hypermasculinity; toxic traits



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Introduction

The negative impact of cinematic glorification of criminals and hypermasculine characters on society has been studied astutely (Ferguson, 2019; Sonkar & Srivastava, 2023). The influence of these movies has led to several real-life criminal acts. Women have faced the brunt of the violence presented on-screen. Their characters are perceived through the patriarchal gaze as meek objects, marking their presence on the cinematic screen (Anujan et al., 2012). Therefore, countering this stereotype and presenting women's struggles in various dimensions have been the focus of modern Indian films.

Contemporary Indian movies have attained worldwide recognition and acclaim in recent years. A multitude of themes and genres have been traversed through these narratives. Stories dealing with the subaltern, feminist, and LGBTQ+ experiences have garnered commercial and critical success in the past decades (Pardiwalla, 2024). Therefore, their influence on Indian society cannot be underestimated. Especially in the case of women-centric films, they have

provided a platform for representing women's empowerment, self-expression, and a search for identity beyond the prescribed social codes. Films such as *Queen*, *English Vinglish*, *Manikarnika*, and *Kahani* have paved the way for women-led films. Historical figures such as Rani Lakshmi Bai's defiance of the British Raj are showcased as powerful tools for change in the movie *Manikarnika*. Similarly, *Thappad* and *Mardaani* contribute to the discourse on female agency by situating women's resistance both in the domestic sphere, against patriarchal violence, and in the public sphere, where they confront systemic issues like human trafficking and prostitution. The everyday struggles of single women and homemakers, and their need for experiences beyond their prescribed spheres, are presented in *Queen* and *English Vinglish* (Sharma, 2018; Chatterjee, 2016).

The rationale for selecting these movies is that the films span two decades and diverse genres, offering contrasting portrayals of women as villains and leaders, thereby reflecting mainstream and feminist-marketed narratives of empowerment. Each film foregrounds female resistance but also reveals paradoxes in which authority is asserted by subjugating both men and women, making them ideal case studies for interrogating whether such portrayals genuinely challenge or reproduce patriarchy. *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi* (1996) and *Fukrey* (2013) encapsulate female criminal bosses who lead their organization with an iron hand. They coerce others and

are quite clear in their intentions. At the same time, *Gulaab Gang* (2014) paints the picture of ‘Rajjo’ as an individual who uses righteous violence to help women.

In contrast to her, Sumitra Devi stands as a political leader who seeks to maintain her power by hook or crook. Lastly, *Begum Jaan* (2017), furnishes the titular character as someone who engages in the criminal act of prostitution but only to help disenfranchised women. Thus, a plethora of characters emerge who run contrary to the traditional trope of Indian women in films. This paper centers on an analysis of the protagonists, their settings, and the contexts that shape their acts of rebellion. The study addresses these questions: Do the protagonists’ acts of rebellion genuinely challenge patriarchal structures, or do they paradoxically reproduce patriarchy by assuming its roles and subverting others? In what ways do the protagonists, both overtly and covertly, exert dominance by subduing men and women to secure authority? Here, power is examined in two dimensions: as a tangible force, often enacted by hypermasculine men, and as a symbolic construct, in which respect is demanded of those who are subdued. The study argues that the selected films, while appearing to challenge patriarchal norms, construct female protagonists whose resistance paradoxically involves the subjugation of both men and women. In doing so, they dilute the emancipatory promise of feminist cinema and complicate its broader project of women’s empowerment.

Recent scholarship on feminist representations in Indian cinema has illuminated the paradoxical nature of empowerment in women-centric films. While many contemporary Bollywood productions outwardly challenge patriarchal ideologies, their narratives often reinscribe gender hierarchies under the guise of female liberation. For instance, Chakraborty (2017) argues that the rise of the “quasi-empowered” heroine in post-2000 cinema reflects more cosmetic empowerment than actual agency. These female characters, though central to the plot, often embody aspirational modernity shaped by neoliberal values rather than authentic feminist autonomy. This symbolic empowerment serves commercial and ideological interests, maintaining the gendered power structures it ostensibly critiques. Similarly, Sharma (2018), in her analysis of *Queen (2014)*, contends that even narratives celebrated for depicting women’s emancipation reproduce patriarchal nationalisms. Rani’s apparent liberation is situated within a transnational framework that continues to regulate women’s sexuality and independence. Thus, the protagonist’s self-discovery abroad becomes a cinematic strategy for reconstituting middle-class Indian morality rather than a genuine break from patriarchal norms. This reflects the broader trend where the female subject’s agency is circumscribed within acceptable sociocultural limits. Kaur and Sharma’s (2016) study on *The Dirty Picture* and *Grand Masti* similarly critiques Bollywood’s embrace of postfeminist “raunch culture,” arguing that sexual assertiveness is commodified as empowerment while reinforcing objectification and

heteronormative hierarchies. Such representations transform feminist resistance into another marketable aesthetic, echoing Rosalind Gill's notion of "the resexualization of feminism." Likewise, Irshad (2023) introduces the concept of *hegemonic femininity* in her comparative study of *Fire (1996)* and *Shakuntala Devi (2020)*, noting that contemporary female leads often emulate masculine dominance or align with hegemonic masculinity rather than dismantle it. This imitation of masculine power perpetuates patriarchal binaries and marginalizes non-conforming gender expressions.

Taken together, these studies focus pointedly on the aberrant femininities and their discourses, which undermine patriarchal underpinnings, yet only their positive aspect is studied. Toxicity is still attributed to masculinity. Through these studies, a need arises for a study that understands the negative aspects of violence employed by women. Further, how does it silence both the men and the women in their employment, as well as those associated with them?

Methodological Framework

This study draws on bell hooks' (1992) theory of the *oppositional gaze* and Misha Kavka's (2002) concept of *visual codes* to explore how Indian cinema constructs female protagonists who appear to challenge patriarchal structures yet ultimately reproduce them through hypermasculine behavior, attire, and language. Hooks' oppositional gaze resists patriarchal and colonial visual regimes by advocating a critical spectatorship that refuses

passive engagement with dominant cinematic narratives. Through this lens, women viewers—and by extension, women characters—can reclaim agency by looking back, questioning the authority of representation, and disrupting hegemonic visual pleasure. Applied to contemporary Bollywood cinema, this theoretical frame enables an interrogation of how films that center women’s defiance—through aggression, assertiveness, or sexual autonomy—create visual and narrative forms that simultaneously celebrate and constrain female power.

Building upon this, Kavka’s (2002) notion of visual code provides a framework for understanding how films speak to their audiences through visual and emotional cues, shaping identification, empathy, and ideology. The visual code of feminist or postfeminist cinema involves how the camera, *mise-en-scène*, and performance collectively construct a relational dynamic between the spectator and the protagonist. In the Indian context, the visual code often frames the strong woman as both an object of admiration and containment—her attire, gestures, and visual presentation invite identification while reinforcing gendered hierarchies of desirability and dominance. The protagonist’s bold fashion choices, commanding body language, and stylized aggression serve as visual signifiers of empowerment, yet are simultaneously mediated by patriarchal aesthetics. In this study, visual code is applied to analyze how the gaze, costume, framing, dialogue, and emotional tone of scenes invite

spectators to consume female resistance as spectacle, transforming feminist defiance into a visually palatable form of patriarchal negotiation.

From a postfeminist perspective, this paradox aligns with Gill's (2007) and McRobbie's (2009) critiques that popular media commodifies feminism by translating empowerment into an individualized, aestheticized narrative of confidence, choice, and consumer freedom. Bollywood's portrayal of the "New Woman" embodies this transformation: she is assertive, visually bold, and economically independent, yet her power is circumscribed within neoliberal and heteronormative ideals. Her defiance—whether through attire, language, or physical dominance—becomes a performance of agency rather than its authentic exercise, signaling how postfeminist cinema transforms collective liberation into a privatized display of strength.

Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity and its feminist extension into hegemonic femininity suggest that men as a group hold power over men, often making this dominance seem natural or common sense. Irshad (2023) further elucidates how women's resistance often replicates patriarchal logic. When women embody aggression, emotional detachment, or dominance, they enact what Irshad (2023) terms *hypermasculine femininity*—a form of resistance that mirrors rather than dismantles masculine authority. Such portrayals give rise to *toxic femininity*, where power is expressed through control and competition, not

solidarity or empathy. Ultimately, the intersection of hooks' oppositional gaze and Kavka's visual address reveals how Bollywood's representation of strong women often recasts resistance as spectacle, thereby diluting the emancipatory potential of feminist cinema and reaffirming patriarchal systems under the guise of empowerment.

In addition, forms of resistance enacted through a woman's body are viewed positively in the cultural arena. Conversely, the adverse effects of this revolt are rarely noticed and analyzed. Susan Bordo considers a woman's body space as having a 'double-bind' presence (Bordo 2018, 2095). Here, the performativity of revolt is perceived as endangering the body. Bordo studies women who have anorexia and reject food based on their revolt against meeting societal standards. On a similar note, this paper argues that this double bind arises to meet the societal expectation of presenting empowered female characters, yet, conversely, the female lead ends up exhibiting hypermasculine and toxic traits (Alonzo & Guerrero, 2009). Violence, both through language and bodies, defines this toxic trait. In a criminal world, hypermasculinity is required to make one's name. Thus, hypermasculinity has come under scrutiny within the past century, but females' utilization of these traits has rarely been studied. Furthermore, female and male hypermasculinity uses similar tools of suppression of the marginalized, but in the case of females, hypermasculinity is portrayed positively.

Empowered Female Characters and Visual Codes

Female characters have been the focus of many traditional and modern films. However, traditional films display women's struggles, lack of agency, and stereotypical portrayals. Contrarily, with the emergence of feminist discourse, stereotypical portrayals, women's status as the Other, and the context surrounding these constructions are critically deconstructed. Moreover, the patriarchal outlook sees a woman's being as contained within the 'desire' that reverberates from the masculine subject through 'wonder' (Irigaray, 1993, p. 73). Wonder idolizes the female subject, constructing an image of reverence. Any movement away from this image translates into trouble. Patriarchy uses ideological apparatus and sometimes repressive apparatus (Althusser, 2006), for example, physical confinement, domination, and violence, to govern and control the female body and sexuality. However, according to Foucault, discipline is exercised more frequently covertly, not through punishment (Sheridan, 1977). Disciplining the body is pivotal in controlling the mental and physical spheres. The way women walk and talk, their attire, their readings, and their understanding of the world around them are controlled by this 'discipline.' Revolting against this system leads to the revocation of patriarchal protection. This act is considered to push a female body into a lawless world, where they lose their social standing and integrity. Modern parallels for this phenomenon have been the shaming of 'OnlyFans' creators (Litan et al., 2022; Lippmann et al., 2023) and other online adult content creators. Herein lies the conundrum: a woman's body is presented as a site of purity and,

conversely, also as the location of fulfillment of sexual desire.

Female bodies (attire, gestures, and body movements), language, and sexuality, which are otherwise reasons for their oppression, are displayed as empowering agents for the female characters. Moreover, women's control over their sexual prowess or the power of granting 'sexual' fulfillment gives them power in the economic sphere (Gil et al., 2021; Srsic et al., 2021). Women are portrayed as autonomous individuals, fully entitled to prioritize their careers and exert control over their professional domains. This choice of career is not merely a preference but a means of claiming these spaces to secure financial independence and authority, as shown in movies like *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi* and *Begum Jaan*. Maya is the head of a massive illegal wrestling and gambling syndicate, a domain almost always shown as controlled by men. Similarly, Begum Jaan asserts ownership and emotional investment in the premises, demonstrated in scenes where she defiantly refuses to vacate after being ordered by the Partition authorities. She asserts, "I will die like a queen and not a beggar," referencing her refusal to surrender either her dignity or domain. With this control comes a newfound agency, allowing women to shape interactions between the sexes on their terms and assert power in traditionally male-dominated spheres. This shift challenges outdated gender roles, positioning women as active agents in their own empowerment. As argued in the previous section of this paper, female

leads who indulge in criminal activities adopt new names and avoid patronyms as a marker of their empowered selves and symbolic identity formation. They decode the politics of naming and either detach themselves from patronym, as in the case of Bholi Panjaban, Madam Maya, and Begum Jaan, or use their first names, for instance, Rajjo.

In Bollywood films, characters who indulge in criminal activities are sometimes portrayed as Robin Hoods, bringing strength to the dispossessed. However, crime provides a platform for the female leads to assert their agency over other female characters and marginalized, perceived-as-effeminate male characters, thereby exerting dominance. The bleak world of crime legitimizes their actions and requires specific gestures and attire, hinting towards imitating hypermasculine features (Hussain & Hussein, 2021); for instance, in Figure 1, Bholi Panjaban and Miss Maya wear a leopard-printed dress, symbolizing the powerful position of the female in the world of crime, which aligns with Misha Kavka's idea of visual codes. The leopard print, traditionally associated with wildness, dominance, and sexual agency, visually encodes both power and transgression, signifying autonomous power. Further, their physical power is enforced by burly men who sit around and protect them. In *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi*, these characters remain unnamed, and their only function is to effectuate Madam Maya's power effectively. Miss Maya's expressions rarely show emotions other than a bemused smile and anger. A similar link interconnects all the characters chosen for this study. Female leads'

contours and postures convey their power and influence, serving as prominent visual codes.



Figure 1: *Khiladiyon Ka Khiladi* (1996); A leopard headgear and scarf adorned by Miss Maya and her expressionless face.

Similarly, long hair and femininity have been interlinked in Indian tradition, but here, Miss Maya adorns a scarf over her head to embody the power of the masculine world. Moreover, Mahie, in *Gulaab Gang*, who characterizes violence and aggression, wears a constable's dress, whereas all the other gang members wear pink saris, symbolizing their subordinated power and collectivity. In contrast, the sari is perceived as a symbol of femininity and weakness, e.g., in *Gulaab Gang*, Sumitra deploys her goons to kill Rajjo, but she brutally beats them. While talking to a goon, Pratima said, '*Sari aap pahane the ki wo? Wo pahani thi na, aur katta aapke hath me tha*' (Whether you wore the sari or she? She wore the sari, right? And the pistol was in your hand). However, when traditional female virtues are highlighted in

the movies, Miss Maya and Rajjo appear wearing saris. Even Begum Jaan appears in traditional attire twice before Raja Sahab (the King). Otherwise, she does not follow the traditional dress code throughout her screen presence, hinting at her powerful and authoritative personality, reflected in her attire, language, and gestures.

Another tool filmmakers employ to show the empowered self is the body movements and gestures of the female leads. It includes their way of walking and sitting, even in the presence of men, which is otherwise proscribed for women. Women defy the stereotypical way of walking and sitting. For instance, Begum Jaan, appearing with a naked back and getting a massage from a brothel inmate, resembles the male characters who are in power and economically strong. In Figure 2, she sits open-legged, smoking a hookah, showing complete authority and dominance inside her brothel in front of the powerful government officers. Similarly, Rajjo sits in the same posture when Pawan Babu, a local politician, asks her to support his party. Rajjo in *Gulaab Gang* serves as the purveyor of the group's ideology, the justice. She serves as the central frame of reference, and in Figure 3, we can see how this is enacted. Here, Rajjo sits opposite a political leader who wishes for her support in the upcoming elections. The political leader sits beside his group of goons and is clad in all-white, symbolizing a clean image, but the garb here is adorned rather than actual. The reflection of power dynamics is evident in the visual framing of both characters: the politician is surrounded by his enforcers,

while Rajjo is similarly encircled by her own followers, or “justice providers”.



Figure 2: *Begum Jaan* (2017); Begum Jaan is sitting and smoking a Hookah, in front of the government officials of newly made India (on the left) and Pakistan (on the right).



Language becomes an empowering tool for female characters (Litosseliti, 2014), thereby enabling the open display of sexuality through their speech. They are inseparable parts of the

criminal world and the female's revived selves, enabling them to challenge the idea of gendered language, its associated powerlessness, and the discourse of sexuality and control. Abusive content, slang, and vulgar terms otherwise associated with men's speech feature in the female protagonists' language. Moreover, society proscribes the open display of the sexuality of women and utilizes it as a strategy to control female bodies and movements outside the home. Additionally, sexual issues are perceived as a taboo subject in Indian society, but these characters leave behind feminine coyness related to sexual interactions. Begum Jaan speaks without reserve about coitus and sexual issues. Begum Jaan calls man '*teen tang wala murga*' (three-legged cock), referring to their sexual organ (penis) and helpless and vulnerable state inside her territory. Helplessness here signifies the men's enforced silence and dependence within the brothel, where their physical desires render them powerless. In this space, they lose the ability to assert or negotiate their usual positions of power. Similarly, Madamji (aka Sumitra Devi), the primary antagonist in *Gulaab Gang*, reprimands a police inspector for not bowing before her and only saluting her. Her anger is palpable as can be seen in Figure 4, and she expresses her anger with the words, '*Apki kamar mein dard hai kya? Police mein fitness ki bahot zarorat hoti hai. Inko sick leave pe bhej dijiye, lambi wali* (Do you have back pain? It is important to be fit when you are in the Police. Send him on sick leave [the officer who salutes] for a long time). Further, Madamji asks another police officer to touch her feet. These acts call

for complete prostration, presenting a rather bleak picture of the power being enforced.



Figure 4: *Gulaab Gang* (2014); Madamji (Sumitra Devi) is angry at the Police officer who salutes, instead of bowing down in front of her.

(*sistertuc**) and *dalli* (broker), transgress the boundary of feminine speech, traditionally characterized by coyness, submissiveness, and politeness. Their unfiltered language helps them form their identity, or an empowered self, which is coupled with the process of ‘Othering.’ Female characters use inappropriate language to mock common masculine traits (Chauhan, 2025). Bholi Panjaban mocks the sexual prowess of Pandit as she says, ‘*Aaj kal nazar nahi aa raha kahi gupt rog to nahi ho gya na tujhe?*’ (You are not visible these days. Have you got any venereal/sexual disease?) The female protagonist’s adaptation to the violent and criminal world legitimizes her deviant and vulgar speech, giving them the upper hand and control over the

other characters. Such explicit language may seem to transgress the traditional boundaries of feminine speech. However, it also reflects a broader postfeminist shift in cinema, where women's open discussion of sex and desire through unfiltered language signifies both liberation and complicity. By adopting expressions once reserved for male discourse, these characters construct new visual and linguistic codes that challenge modesty and reclaim female voice. Thus, the new woman emerges as a figure of agency, disrupting patriarchal decorum. However, their empowering strategies, in essence, can be correlated with masculine traits, negatively affecting both the female and male characters in these films (masculine and effeminate), but especially the 'marginalized' men.

Oppression of 'Marginalized' Men

Patriarchal structures, by definition, encompass the notion of power and strategies through which the collective 'Man' functions. Power is thus signified by the signifier of 'Man' (Mondal, 2014, p. 742). This correlation signals that every man has the potential for using negative force, whereas women are weak and disenfranchised individuals. A contrast between a collective identity (of men) and an individual self (of a woman) in the system is developed to explain the subversion enacted and enforced on women. Parallel to the collectivization of men's identity, a silencing effect is also performed on weaker/effeminate men. Men who stand with the protagonists are supporters, while the other men are antagonists; in turn, both have no voice

in the presence of the empowered females (Jha, 2022). Oppressing the ‘invisible man’ is a cinematic visual code that has been vigilantly neglected.

Men on screen have been studied with respect to their power to change, the revolution they initiate, and the authority ingrained within their being (Prasad, 2009). Through their power, men intervene and control the lives of women. Men and patriarchy play the primary antagonist roles in these films. Where patriarchy represses women ideologically, and men enforce it physically. Thus, defeating and demeaning patriarchy and men are seen as a marker of a woman’s strength. Robert Jensen (2017) argues that even healthy masculinities try to curb a woman’s free expression and similarly set exceptional standards for men. Therefore, even if there is chivalrous protection, it always comes at the expense of complete surrender to the man. Confinement in the patriarchal boundaries is the ultimate goal of every form of masculinity. Thus, breaking this bondage becomes the primary objective of these films, and exerting power over men concretizes the self-identity they create.

Two categories of men can be seen: the right individual man, characterised by empathy, equality, and emotional honesty, such as Surjeet and the camaraderie of men who side themselves with ‘toxic’ masculinity, rooted in domination, control, and suppression, portrayed through King Don in *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi*, Pawan babu (a politician) in *Gulaab Gang*, and

Masterji (in disguise of a right individual) in *Begum Jaan*. Moreover, the men, whether bureaucrats, soldiers, or clients, embody institutionalized masculinity, asserting control over women's bodies and livelihoods. These systems—whether through the moral policing in *Begum Jaan* or the corrupt local governance in *Gulaab Gang*—render women economically and socially dependent while legitimizing their subservience to men. The female body becomes a site of regulation and ownership, shaped by patriarchal power embedded within institutional norms. Contrarily, Salim Bhai is seen as the ideal masculine figure. He protects the women at the haveli/kotha (mansion/brothel), respects them, and symbolizes hope. Here, through Saleem bhai and Surjeet, positive use of masculinity is depicted as being under the control of these female protagonists. On the surface, Salim Bhai is appreciated by everyone at the brothel/mansion. However, his presence is tolerated because it is economically linked to their work. He works for Begum Jaan, not with her. Bodily strength is the commodity that begets him, his economic 'value,' as also reflected in cases of hired bodyguards in *Fukrey* and *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi*. Their presence is barely noticeable throughout the film, and their actions are those of an 'enforcer' (Johnson, 1962, p. 399).

The suppression of male character is complete only when internalized by the oppressed (Wolf, 1986). Consenting to the suppression lays the world of the ‘Other’ open to supervision and control, through immense power and money. Attire, language, and gestures are similarly interlinked in this process. This visual code is evident through characters, such as Undertaker (in ‘Khiladyon ka Khiladi’), Salim Bhai, and the two nameless African men (in *Fukrey*). ‘Undertaker’ wears a sash with the name ‘Miss Maya,’ showing the control and power. Similarly, barcodes are tattooed on the necks of the (nameless) African men in *Fukrey*, highlighting the complete ownership of these men and their unknown identity, even after being powerful, which is further perpetuated through the ‘silence’ of these men.



Figure 5: *Khiladiyon Ka Khiladi* (1996); Madam Maya putting the Gold bracelet on Akshay Malhotra’s arm, signifying her ownership over him.

They only speak when spoken to and often work as a comic relief. A tokenized existence is thus assigned to them. This tokenization is embedded in their barcodes in *Fukrey* and in the gold bangles in *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi*. Figure 5 depicts Madam Maya putting the gold bangle that represents her ownership on the protagonist (Akshay Malhotra), along with other hired men. These instruments efface an individual's identity and facilitate the use of their bodily strength to ensure others' subservience to the woman boss.

On the other hand, many influential men (working as antagonists) starkly oppose these lead female characters and work in tandem with the system. Policing activities of the system always hinder a woman's free expression; thus, there is constant strife and patriarchal anxiety in these narrative spaces. This system presents a repressive state that denies them justice. Conversely, the plots of the films selected here surpass this anxiety and present a mutually interlinked existence in which the woman protagonist attains a position of power. If there is resistance against the system, there is a reverence for it, too.

A symbiotic relationship is present with the system. The plot of 'Khiladyon ka Khiladi' revolves around a Video Cassette (VHS) that captures the illegal activities of prominent New York figures. Similarly, in *Fukrey*, Bholi Punjaban provides escort services, runs online scams, and works with police and politicians. Her dominion over the system is thus substantiated and

visualized through the discomfort the police and the politician's PA (Personal Assistant) experience. Even with the patriarchal discomfort, there is an understanding between the system and these women characters.

Institutional structures mainly governed and controlled by men view women merely as objects for physical gratification, with the disturbing implication that female consent holds no significance. As Masterji in *Begum Jaan* asserts near the film's conclusion, '*Ek randi ke kharid daar hote hai, na ki shouhar,*' (A prostitute has buyers, not husbands). To enforce this ideology, the democratic system and its components (police, government officials, and courts) work in sync with the patriarchal order. An effectual silence is prolonged *ad infinitum* through the policing of these systems. Except for the *Gulaab Gang*, men are the primary antagonists who control these policing agencies. The female protagonists wield violence to reclaim autonomy and disrupt the structures that oppress them. Their aggression—seen in Rajjo's vigilantism or Begum Jaan's armed defiance—serves as both resistance and survival. However, this resistance is fraught with contradiction: by adopting masculine-coded violence, these women reproduce the very power dynamics they seek to overturn. For example, *Gulaab Gang* members are taught self-protection through sticks and sickles, whereas in *Begum Jaan*, the brothel workers learn to use guns to protect their home [Kotha]. Violence is justified on the premises that women are

treated as the 'second sex,' thus, their dispossessed selves have to attain power by hook or by crook.

Susan Bordo's (2018) idea of the double bind presents an inherent conundrum within the system of resistance that women engage in through their bodies. Women who have anorexia and refuse to conform to societal standards, in effect, hurt their bodies. They perceive themselves as resisting societal norms, but they are also negating their own bodies. In the films selected here, the women, through violence, fight the oppression. Still, when they themselves adopt the same violent and toxic traits to suppress the people who support them, it turns into a well-known idiomatic expression, 'a double-edged sword,' subverting the idea of power and protection by these female leads and undermining the purpose of making these feminist movies as they adopt the same strategies, masculine language, gestures, and attire. Although they can appear empowering, they silently delimit the possibilities of empowerment to other individuals associated with them. Further, any conversation is obstructed by this performance. The final section of this paper links Bordo's concept in these narrative spaces and argues that alternate representations of empowered female characters are introduced in several other movies in Indian Cinema.

Double-edged Sword

Females' selection of crime as a profession and their modus operandi, such as the use of

violence, abusive language, resistance to the female dress code, and open display of sexuality, enable them to dominate their peers and serve justice to the marginalized female/male. Although these defiant traits have been studied as the emergence of powerful, new women (Datta, 2000), they constitute the idea of hypermasculinity. They are criticised by academicians and feminist thinkers (Paunksnis & Paunksnis, 2020; Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020) in movies and in the academic world when a man possesses the same violent and hypermasculine features. On the contrary, those who do not behave similarly are marginalised, abused, and ostracised from both the reel and the real world, for instance, Ajay in *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi* and Surjeet in *Begum Jaan*, along with the men in the house of Bholi Panjaban. In these films, the female protagonists own and control both men and women. This ownership and desire to control are based on certain features of these characters; for instance, Begum Jaan's ownership over the bodies of female inmates of the brothel was based on their physical beauty and their potential to generate income, which is an essential component for her to control and dominate. She said, '*Muh jal gaya na to, koi dhobi ki beep ki tarah ghumati rahegi. Na koi kharidega na mai yaha rahne dunggi. Laat mar ke bahar nikal dunggi*' (If your face gets burned, you will wander recklessly. Neither will anyone buy you, nor will I allow you to stay here. I will throw you out of here). This statement contradicts the idea that female leads are the sole protectors of women's dignity and identity. Similarly, the male body and strength are construed as desirable

objects because they have the potential for violence and aggression, as in the case of Ajay in *Khiladiyon ka Khiladi*.

A closer look at Figure 6 depicts the culmination of the double-edged nature of the empowerment discussed in this paper. In this penultimate scene, where all hope is lost for protecting the home/brothel, the women sit around Begum Jaan in a destitute state. Begum Jaan then addresses them, commenting on the horrible nature of the world she had protected them from. She is the center stage, where the emotions of others are allayed. However, this home is only hers, falsifying the argument that the movie portrays a coterie of empowered characters. She rules absolutely and oversees the physical and psychological aspects of the other characters whose lives are directly under her control. Another gaze in this scene presents the male character standing in front of the woman. His portrayal, as argued in this paper, reflects the general trend in these films of presenting the 'right' man as an enforcer and a follower.

Similarly, the other women in this scene revere and follow Begum Jaan's directions. One can argue that, because these films portray a criminal world, the characters must resort to violence to assert their identities. However, the question in this comment can be, 'Whose identity?' The other women are followers, and their identity is embedded, which circumvents the central protagonist's identity. So, their identities are merged through self-inflicted

subversion. Thus, the narrative turns from the destruction of patriarchy to the creation of reverse patriarchy, here, ruled by a single female crime lord.



Figure 6: *Begum Jaan* (2017). Begum Jaan smoking Hookah in the centre stage, surrounded by her group and Salim Bhai standing.

The idea of the male body as an asset in these movies is solidified when the same female protagonists derive voyeuristic pleasure (Mulvey, 1975) while watching the men, for the way Bholi Punjaban looks at Dilip Singh (Choocha), further strengthening the idea of reverse scopophilia. It is also evident in the case of Madam Maya when she derives a similar pleasure from Akshay's fighting skill. Thus, in the pursuit of advocating women's empowerment, these female protagonists negatively affect the main arguments of feminist discourse by dominating the world by adopting the often-criticized hypermasculine features and the male gaze, which disempower women.

Moreover, based on select movies, it can be argued that women's dominance and control over men/females through hypermasculine traits are legitimized by portraying them as victims or having a traumatic and troubled past. For instance, Begum Jaan and Rajjo (troubled childhood), and Madam Maya, who entered the world of crime to protect her younger sister Priya (Raveena Tondon). In contrast, men are portrayed as innately aggressive and violent, possessing hypermasculine qualities.

Similarly, Robert Jensen links everyday masculinity itself with toxicity. Therefore, masculinity is always viewed with suspicion and is closely supervised. He further suggests that reviewing 'Healthy Masculinity' is a defeatist argument, as all the spectrums of masculinity, toxic, normal, or healthy, only work in tandem with the patriarchal structure (Jensen, 2019). In contrast, this paper argues that healthy traits are not gender-specific; similarly, toxic traits are not in the sole possession of men. Women throughout these films paint a hypermasculine (toxic) picture through their verbal expressions, body movement, attire, and their aggressive attitude, which subscribes to the idea of their supremacy through the same toxic traits, which are part and parcel of 'toxic' masculinity (Irshad, 2023).

In the movies selected here, female characters use strong men and guns to exert control and power. Parallel to this, females also embody strength by yielding to the world of drinking

and exhibiting lewd behaviors, which raises a pertinent question of how such behaviors strengthen the idea of feminism or empower female characters. In academia, wallowing in such scenarios is associated with men and hypermasculinity and is brutally criticized. On the contrary, the same toxic and hypermasculine traits are adopted, applauded, and glorified in perceived feminist movies, undermining the entire design of feminism and women's empowerment in these movies. Moreover, this sort of film-making and portrayals of female protagonists act as a double-edged sword as in the wake of countering the patriarchy and toxic masculinity, they adopt the same toxic strategies to exploit the characters, both male/female around them and downplay the force of true feminist discourse which is apparent in recent movies like *Thappad* (2020), *Queen* (2013), *English-Vinglish* (2012), *Pink* (2016) and *Chak de India* (2007) (Nikita Thakur 2023, 0:12:22).

Conclusion

The analysis of selected movies shows that these films appear to challenge patriarchy through strong female leads, but their portrayals ultimately reproduce the same structures of dominance they resist. This dynamic becomes a double-edged sword—granting women visibility and agency, yet simultaneously imitating and reinforcing patriarchal notions of power. As a result, these films dilute the emancipatory potential of feminist cinema by redefining empowerment through the very logic they seek to oppose. In these movies, the presentation of

verbal and bodily violence has been glorified as a means of taking possession. An examination of toxic traits that reverberate throughout the films selected here reveals common linkages among the female characters. Their language choice is obscene, especially relating to men, and their attire and body gestures resonate with a more accessible existence, but with indulgences in crimes and exploiting the other characters present. Lastly, toxicity is not confined to or congruent with a specific gender and adversely affects both men and women. Reversing the patriarchal cord has aligned itself with the subjugation of male characters and other less empowered female characters in these movies. Such descriptions in films disrupt the possibility of positive communication between the sexes. This study is limited by its focus on a small selection of mainstream Bollywood films and by its reliance on textual analysis without audience perspectives. More extensive studies focusing on the linguistic devices primarily employed by women can address broader issues of power, discourse, and gender construction.

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