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Masculinist Constructions of Nationalism in India: Gender, Body Politics, and Hindi Cinema

By Nupur Ray

Abstract

Nationalism is an evocative concept with multiple philosophies around its meanings, purposes and contentions. Symbols, imagery, and spectacle play an important role in cultural expressions of nationalism that sustain an emotional response. The paper argues that imaginative constructs of nationalism in India are primarily constructed around women’s bodily metaphors, sexual norms, and their maternal roles in families. Popular culture, particularly cinema, tends to reinforce power hierarchies in which women symbolizing the nation are in need of protection by men or the state as a masculine authority. Hindi cinema has been an integral part of the socio-cultural lives of people in India, and this paper traces a common equation of women with motherhood and the nation, beginning with the film Mother India (1957), which etched gendered ideas of nationhood on the national consciousness. This paper has two objectives: first, to establish, through a brief review of literature, that the foundational edifice of nationalistic discourse in India is embedded in hegemonic masculinity. Further, imagined landscapes of nationalism enforce sexual norms and gender roles, played out on the terrain of women’s bodies. The second objective is to offer a survey of Hindi films responding to different moments in the historical trajectory of nationalist discourse in India, through their portrayals of women characters, their sexual moralities, and normative roles of motherhood. The paper takes a feminist approach to analyze prominent Hindi movies that have reinforced and consolidated gendered constructions of nationalism. By looking at how women’s bodies have become sites of symbolism and sites for discursive constructions of sexuality and motherhood, the paper shows how Hindi cinema’s body politics are embedded in hegemonic masculinity. The paper also recognizes moments of rupture and erosion of these tropes in Hindi films that challenge this hegemony and transform female bodies from sites of coercion and hegemonic nationalism to sites of transformational agency, resistance, and freedom.

Keywords: Nationalism, Gender, Body politics, Masculinity, Sexuality, Hindi cinema, Indian cinema

Introduction

One of the most iconic scenes that came to life on the Indian celluloid is from a classic Hindi movie Mother India (1957). Radha, the mother of a burglar, threatens to kill her most beloved son with a gun when he refuses to set free a girl from his own village that he has forcefully held captive. The son is blind with arrogance that his mother would never harm him. However, the mother rises to the occasion and declares that the girl is the honor of the village, and she could sacrifice a son but not the honor of her community. In that moment of killing her son, the persona of a simple mother expands to the grandeur of “Mother India,” fulfilling her...
role as a mother figure to the community by protecting the honor of the village, which is metaphorically embedded in the captive girl’s virginity.

In the early 1990s, as India was opening up to globalization and an era of liberalization, stories of families from the Indian diaspora depicting or seeking lost Indian values and the threat of Western influence found opulent expressions on the big screen in the backdrop of wealthier foreign locations. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ), the first movie of its kind and a major trend setter, defined this wave in Hindi Cinema during the 1990s. In one of the most popular scenes of the movie, the female lead Simran is devastated and ashamed about losing her virginity because she believes (despite it actually being a prank) that she had sex with the male lead Raj. In the next scene, we see an otherwise flamboyant Raj, delivering a serious dialogue to Simran which eventually becomes a critical point for these characters to fall in love with each other. Raj says, “I am also an Indian and I know what izzat (honor or losing one’s virginity before marriage) means to an Indian girl. I would never ever dream to do this with an Indian girl like you.” This movie, along with several others of the same genre that followed, thrived on the theme of eulogizing the sacrosanct untainted purity of Indian women as a marker of India’s greatness as a nation. The representation of women’s bodies and construction of sexualities along with hegemonic masculinities, as caricatures of a larger narrative of an essentialist discourse of nationalism in India, has dominated the mainstream storytelling in the Hindi film Industry. The imagination of an ideal Indian woman is embedded in notions of sexual purity and maternal duties symbolizing the greatness of her country.

Nationalism is an evocative concept with multiple philosophies around its meanings and purposes. As evident in Anderson’s compelling claim that one of the enduring attractions of nationalism is the emotional fervor it creates (1991). Thus, symbols, imageries, and spectacles play an important role in cultural expressions of nationalism that sustain an emotional response. He also argued that a nation is “an imagined political community and it is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, 1991, p. 6).

The paper argues that the imagination embedded in cultural and social moorings is primarily constructed around women’s bodily metaphors, sexual norms, and their maternal roles in families. Notwithstanding Anderson’s seminal contribution to the study of nationalist discourse, a limitation of this theory is the invisibility of women and the way their roles and responsibilities have been strategically co-opted to create a larger narrative of nationalism.

There are a wide range of sources from literature, history, visual spectacle, and popular culture that have constructed, reconfigured, and reinforced gendered expressions of the power hierarchy. This includes the idea that women symbolizing the nation need protection by the men or state as a superior masculine authority. Cinema plays a significant role in fostering such ideas, as it impacts and triggers emotions amongst its audiences in curious ways. For some time, Indian cinema has been an integral part of the socio-cultural lives of Indian peoples with its reach extending to other parts of the world.

Echoed in cinematic visions across the decades is the idea of India infused with sentimental fervor for the *Bharat Mata* (Mother-Nation), as imagined and evoked by the leaders of the Indian freedom struggle. The early nationalists and freedom fighters equated the nation’s honor with that of a woman’s, thus linking a woman to her body and sexuality. The construction of a colonized nation as a mother who needs to be set free by her sons, i.e. the imperial masters, was used to evoke and inspire people to join the Indian nationalist movement. The prerequisite to this construction is that mother-nation-womanhood embodied the exalted virtues of chastity, purity, sacrifice, tolerance, forgiveness, and a de-sexualized self. As much as one can credit Mahatma Gandhi for feminizing the Indian freedom struggle by invoking these virtues as essential tools for both men and women, we cannot deny that he essentialized these qualities as integral to womanhood, leaving little space for deviance or exceptions.
The enticement of the imagery of mother-nation-womanhood has long fascinated Indian cinema writers, actors, and audiences. The character of Nargis in the film *Mother India*, a sexually oppressed but resilient mother ready to kill her own son to protect the honor of the girl/village/nation, is one of the most powerful moments that etched the gendered idea of nationhood on the national consciousness.

In the light of these observations, the paper has two objectives: First I establish, through a brief review of literature, that the foundational edifice of nationalist discourse in India is embedded in hegemonic masculinity. Secondly, I argue that imagined landscapes of nationalism defined by borders and boundaries are constructed through sexual norms and gendered moralities on the terrain of female bodies. In a historical sense, an urge to construct Indian nationalism through women’s bodies found its best expression in Hindi cinema. The Hindi film industry can be broadly studied as reflecting and responding to the history of nationalist discourse in India, through different portrayals of women characters, their sexual moralities, and normative anatomies. The Hindi film industry popularly known as Bollywood has largely dominated the Indian film industry for many decades, until the recent Over-The-Top boom (method of delivery for film and TV entertainment over the Internet). The paper argues that there are three dimensions to women’s body politics in Hindi cinema, which have broadly shaped people’s imaginings of India as a nation embedded in hegemonic masculinity: the body as a site of symbolism, the body as a site of sexuality, and the body as a site of reproduction. The paper also highlights moments that stretch and rupture these boundaries and thereby challenge this hegemony. The paper explores this tension through a critical reading of some of the most prominent Hindi movies in the past few decades.

**Gender and Nationalism: A Feminist Overview**

Academic scholarship on nationalism is richly expressed in the writings of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Anthony Smith, and Karl Deutsch. Their extensive works dwelled upon various dynamics and processes in the making of a nation and its subjects, taking us through defining moments of history. However, feminist readings of these works have raised concerns around the invisibility of gender in their theorizing of nationalism. Overlooking the gendered politics of nationalism and the relationship between patriarchy and nationalist politics leads to a reductionist narrative of nation-making. Feminist thinkers have established gender as an important analytical lens to scrutinize all dimensions of nationalism and its processes. This exercise was not just imperative to unfold gender politics but more significantly to erode the dominant hegemonic patriarchal discourses about nationalism.

Feminist scholars first countered the invisibility of women and gender-neutral approaches in historical narratives of nationalism. An eminent voice in this space has been Anne McClintock (1993) who asserted that Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm failed to include gender and sexualities in their visions of nationhood. In this same vein, Glenda Sluga (2000) observed that most theorizing of nationalisms is based on historical narratives that have rendered the depictions of nationalism and nation-building as sex-neutral, justifiable, and acceptable. Ida Blom (2000) has argued that the history of nations and nation-building have been captured through the public sphere artifacts of states, governments, kings, and statesmen, whereas the private sphere, inhabited by women in roles of progeny-bearers, care-givers, and cultural producers, never became a part of these histories.

In the Indian context, though the roles of women in the making of Indian nationalism may not be invisible, their contributions have been shunted to the peripheries of historical narratives. If we acknowledge the male members of the Constituent Assembly that framed the Indian Constitution in 1950 as the “Fathers of Constitution,” we forget to acknowledge the fourteen female members and their significant interventions in the Constituent Assembly debates that led to the making of the historical document.
The second set of concerns raised by feminist thinkers is the gendered construction of nationalism that is wielded with power, control, and hegemony. McClintock declares, “All nations are gendered and invented” (1997, p. 105). If one goes back to the thesis of nations as “imagined communities,” these communities are highly gendered and hierarchical in nature with clear demarcation of roles, responsibilities, and relative power positions of men and women. These clearly demarcated constructions of masculinity and femininity are significant to the politics of nationalism and nation-building.

In her path-breaking work *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*, Cynthia Enloe observed that “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (1990, p. 44). In either case, the real actors are men who are defending their freedom, their honor, their homeland, and their women (Enloe 1990). Nagel extends Enloe’s argument to claim that one of the most insidious ways in which these differences are channeled and consolidated are through gendered expressions of nationalism, creating a moral economy of a nation (2003).

The next section looks at various aspects of hegemonic masculinist discourses of nationalism and how these discourses have appropriated women.

**Gendered Nationalism: Hegemonic Masculinist Discourses and Critiques**

Patriarchy is “a family-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (Rich, 1977, p. 57). This broad definition allows us to grasp all the ideological contours surrounding patriarchy. Nations are conceived as enlarged versions of patriarchal families.

Many theorists of nationalism have noted the tendency of nationalists to liken the nation to a family; it is a male-led household in which both men and women have supposedly natural and defined roles to play. While women may be subordinated politically in nationalist movements and politics, they occupy an important symbolic place as the mothers of the nation. As exalted “mothers in the fatherland” (Koonz, 2013) their purity must be impeccable, and therefore regulation and control of women’s bodies and sexualities has become an integral part of the nationalist project as well.

As aptly expressed by McClintock, the trope of a nation as a patriarchal family clearly illustrates this perspective (1993, p. 64). In her analysis, she presents a contrasting but illuminating picture of the male head of the family/nation as muscular, strong, and dominating whereas women of the family/nation symbolize chastity, purity, docility, and weakness.

Partha Chatterjee illustrates this point by arguing that the nationalist project in India involved two processes: first, to “cultivate the material techniques of modern western civilization” and secondly to “retain and strengthen the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture” (2018, p. 384). The outer-material domain represents the space of science, technology, the state, and economic growth inhabited by men whereas the inner-spiritual domain represents cultural symbols and values—a space inhabited by women and family. Thus, women also have become an imagined group within an imagined community, symbolically representing the ethos of the nation. This divide further reinforces the division between production and reproduction that extends to the social distribution of labor, roles, and responsibilities in society. As argued by Cynthia Enloe, the state project is a masculinist project (1990).

As the above section has explored, within hegemonic masculinist discourses that construct nationalism, we can see the centrality of the body as a site of nationalist politics, a space to etch and exhibit cultural markers and an instrument to carry forward those markers. The section below elaborates on body politics and nationalism in the context of India.
The Body as the Site of Symbolism

First is the appropriation of the body for symbolic representation of nationalism that spans various aspects of cultural and social lives. A corporeal female body not only represents the borders and boundaries of a nation but is also seen as embodiment of all values and norms that constitute the essence of a nation. For example, the figure of Marianne, symbolizing the French Republic, echoes liberty and reason; Britannia, the symbolic female figure of Britain, embodies unity and strength; the lady of Canada represents beauty and inclusivity; and Bharat Mata (Mother India) symbolizes the spiritual essence of India. The patriarchal logic to sustain nationalism is that the feminine that embodies the nation is weak and vulnerable, therefore needing the protection of the masculine that embodies the state and its agencies.

The Body as the Site of Reproduction

Another striking aspect of this visual representation is the female body as a site of motherhood in nationalist discourses. Motherhood and maternity are central to nationalist discourses because an imagined community in the form of a nation is conceived as having a
common origin and belonging which invokes the idea of motherland. The glorification and invoking of mother-as-nation has been specifically appropriated during anti-colonial struggles. Women’s bodies have been used as contested domains on which men construct their political regimes. The reproductive body has also been used to project an ideal femininity and the idea that being a mother is a national duty of women. This myth of an ideal Indian woman essentializes feminine virtues of suffering, purity, self-sacrifice, obedience, and a desexualized self. As Partha Chatterjee (2018) argued, Mother India was mapped onto the female body and etched with certain culturally visible and spiritual qualities of the goddesses to form an essential femininity.

The Body as the Site of Sexuality

It is upon men to defend the nations’ territory symbolized in women’s purity of body, modesty, and morality. As asserted by Mayer, “only pure and modest women can reproduce the pure nation; without purity in biological reproduction, the nation clearly cannot survive” (2000, p. 7). Therefore, men’s control over women’s bodies and sexuality as a nation’s property is integral to masculinist construction of nationalism. This entails control over their personalities and represents acts of authority over the body in the interests of the public order organized around male virtues of what is rational (Mayer 2000). Purity, virtue, and chastity are celebrated as feminine ideals embedded in a female body which is seen as embodying the honor of family, community, and nation (Thapan 2009). Bodies become sites of family and national honor; violation of the body is the family’s shame, the nation’s shame, and men’s shame.

Imagined Subjects: Myth, Enigma, and Fancy around Women in Cinema

As Althusser argues in his work on the ideological state apparatus, hegemonic masculinist discourses of nationhood exert control over women’s body, sexuality, and reproduction, and these discourses are maintained, perpetuated, and normalized through a range of mythical, social, and cultural narratives. They play an important role in ideologically entrenching patriarchal nationalism within the collective consciousness, through cultural narratives that become carriers of these nationalist ideologies (Althusser, 1970). The cultural representations cement the imagined aspects of a community and make it believable. As Stuart Hall has argued, “‘imagined community’ together is a system of cultural representations and practices that produce and reproduce the meaning of the nation” (1997, p. 3).

This is particularly evident in the case of India where mythology, religious notions, and social values are intertwined and travel through regions and multiple languages in the form of folklore and local narratives. Ramayana and Mahabharata are two epics which are strongly entrenched in social consciousness across the South Asian belt. The series attracted the attention of academic scholarship for various reasons. It reflected a powerful intersection of gender, body politics, and nationalism that had far-reaching implications in terms of realigning social norms and boundaries around sexual conduct, freedoms of space and mobility, and social relationships in a newly emerging Hindutva nationalism. The body of Sita, the main protagonist of the epic Ramayana, is a site of symbolism, sexuality, and reproduction. Her body is politicized implicitly and explicitly in multiple ways to reinforce and redefine the border and boundaries of India’s patriarchal nationalist ideologies. This is what some scholars have theorized as stereotyping, which refers to representation of a character/entity/event in limited and selective ways to fulfill an agenda. It is a political strategy of othering that reduces women to their bodily attributes to control them. Stereotyping in popular culture dehumanizes women into erotic consumable commodities for the satisfaction of male sexual desire (Sircar, 1995, p. 320).

Laura Mulvey (1993) has critiqued cinema for objectifying the female body and reducing it to a passive commodity satisfying voyeuristic male sexual fantasies. The female
body is used to create an ideal imaginative woman as an upholder of Indian tradition through her clothing, expressions of sexuality, and grand narratives of motherhood which influences viewers’ subconscious minds. The imaginary construction is reductionist, exclusionary, and even oppressive as an ideal to be emulated by real women. Critical feminist readings view cinema as a cultural practice which represents myths around men and masculinities as well as women and femininities (Smelik, 2016, p. 491). However, this cultural practice is part of the ideological apparatus to construct, consolidate, and create collective nostalgia of national identity based on these rigid gendered identities. The portrayal of women as traditional, submissive, and passive objects of male desire became a strong instrument for the Hindi film industry to restore pride in the motherland (Wadhwani & Barretto, 2007; Ansari, 2007).

The representation of men as angry youth struggling against colonial powers, corporate empires, state atrocities, and social injustices became a common depiction of men in cinema in post-Independence India. The lead female actresses were portrayed as idealized Indian women through conservative clothing, gendered etiquette, and restrained expressions of desire, imagined as “chaste, self-sacrificing, and virtuous” (Kasbekar, 2001, p.291). Cinema became a site of reinvention of Indian nationalist identity that could demarcate the country from its colonial past and move towards being modern, without being any less Indian (Gokulsing & Dissayanke, 1998). The portrayal of the ideal Indian woman was generously used to feed into the collective fantasy (Kakkar, 1988) of one nation, one culture, and one value system.

The Body as Symbol in Hindi Cinema

Numerous illustrations exist of Bharat Mata, including those by Abindranath Tagore, Raja Ravi Verma, MF Hussain, and Asit Kumar Haldar. Common in the first two portraits (Tagore and Verma) is a sense of confined subjectivity for Mother India, which was a dominant visual during the freedom struggle. In most of these depictions, the woman resembles a Hindu Goddess, a homogenizing figure that ignores the multicultural diversity of India. The symbolic representation of India through this figure results in false homogeneity and the exclusion of the multiple identities of women on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity, religion, language, and disabled bodies.

The representation of heroines in the Hindi film industry has always been aligned with the pure and docile image of an ideal Indian woman. This was especially prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s when the heroine character was portrayed in sharp contrast to other women characters in movies, especially the anti-heroine, popularly known as the “vamp.” The heroine was fully clothed, chaste, submissive, and in need of being rescued by the male hero. The anti-heroine, on the other hand, was often deliberately dressed in Western clothing, danced to seductive songs, smoked, and was sexually involved with the anti-hero/villain of the story. She existed at the periphery of the plot, mostly for entertainment. As a country yearning to establish its own autonomous nationhood, the representation of women in cinema became an important tool to concretize that identity by creating a sharp contrast with Western notions of womanhood. Leading actresses during the 1960-1980s like Vajyanti Mala, Wahida Rehman, and Jaya Bachchan became the quintessential figures that embodied the restrained physicality of the ideal Indian woman. The anti-heroines/vamps were played by very talented actresses like Helen, Bindu, Aruna Irani, and others. However, it was the heroine in Hindi films during these years that became an object of fantasy for the common man in the cinema hall. This sharp contrast between heroine and anti-heroine was visible in a range of movies like Zanjeer, Trishul, Amar, Akbar and Anthony, Dharamveer, Sholay, and Yaadon ki Baraat.

Zanjeer, a blockbuster from 1973, depicts Inspector Vijay Khanna, the angry young man of the story, at war with a corrupt system and discriminatory society. The role of the heroine, Mala, a poor and abandoned girl rescued by the hero, was played by Jaya Bhaduri, a leading actress of her time. While Mala appears as a quiet, cultured, and domesticated girl, clad
in traditional Indian clothes and restrained about her attraction towards Vijaya Khanna, the anti-heroine character named Mona is portrayed as flamboyant and flirtatious, wearing revealing Western clothes, smoking a cigar, and entertaining men with seductive songs. The construction of a binary between the ideal Indian womanhood in contrast to other westernized Indian women, such as in Zanjeer, continued to gain popularity in mainstream Hindi films. The instrumental use of women’s bodies in defining the ideal Indian feminine reached its epoch in the 1990s with movies like Pardes, Hum Aapke hain Kaun, Hum Saath-Saath Hain, Pyar Kiya Toh Darna and Hum Dil de chuke Sanam.

In the era of liberalization, when stories of rich non-resident Indians in search of Indianness became the most popular narratives, the representation of lead female protagonists transformed to more urban fusions. Guha-Thakurta observed that in the new urban art forms of modern India, the woman’s form had undergone a striking metamorphosis, posing a new configuration of the modern and the traditional (2004). As Freitag notes, “while its forms were ‘modernized,’ the concepts and ideals it signified always harked back to ‘tradition’...to Indian values and ethics” (2001, p. 57).

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai was one of the highest grossing films of the 1990s, breaking all records. The story starts with the friendship of two college mates, Rahul and Anjali. Their friendship is disrupted by the entry of the highly fashionable and attractive Tina. Anjali is seen as a tomboyish character with stereotypically unfeminine mannerisms, whereas Tina is shown as highly fashionable and Western in her physical presentation but rooted in an Indian ethos. Rahul is instantly attracted to Tina as someone who exhibits the appeal of new sensuality but still carries the pure, docile charm of a quintessential Indian woman. The disjuncture in the story comes with the death of Tina during the birth of her daughter. We see a time lapse and Anjali returns as the dream woman of every Indian man, fully clad in a saree, restrained in her body and clothes as she is not able to play basketball with Rahul like before. She is also seen as a less confident woman, not sure of her choices and appearing miserable. She gets rescued by another man (Salman Khan) who decides that Anjali should marry Rahul. The story implies to girls and women viewers that men are attracted to chaste women who are fully clad, unable to play sports due to restrained physicality, indecisive about their choices, and submissive in demeanor. This dominant misogynist image of a leading woman in Hindi cinema continues to reflect and reinforce the sexist constructions of women’s subjectivities in Indian society.

The Body and Sexual Control in Hindi Cinema

Purity discourses around the female body have largely constituted the narratives of national honor in terms of demarcating ‘our women’ from ‘their women.’ This entails a range of socially constructed norms and practices to control women’s sexual lives by controlling their time, access to space, and mobility in their everyday lives. This sexual code of conduct is endorsed and reiterated through myths, religions, family notions, community morals, and most significantly the threat of rape.

The denial of sexual agency to women, one of the core tenets of the nationalist imagination, has also dominated mainstream Hindi cinema. A heroine’s refusal of a hero’s advances is eventually perceived as consent, a maybe is perceived as consent, and even a nod is interpreted as consent. This has been a recurring plot of love stories, such as the famous Shammi Kapoor teasing his heroines in many songs like Bada par sitaare and Budtameez kaho ya kaho jaanwar, Rajesh Khanna’s Mere Sapno ki Rani, and Dev Anand’s pal bhar le liye koin mujhe pyar kar le in. The songs usually start with the displeasure of heroines being stalked and end with them falling in love. Notions of consent have been so blurred that the denial of women’s sexual agency has become glaringly evident. Though there have been moments of disruption through more nuanced scripts like Mritydand, Paheli, Astitva, Kya Kehna, and Pink, an hegemonic masculinist depiction of women’s sexuality, choice and agency in the
movie Kabir Singh (2019) was validated by its mega success at the box office. Kabir Singh, a remake of Arjun Reddy, stirred dissent and debate between defenders of artistic freedom and feminists who criticized the way intimate partner violence was normalized in the movie. The male protagonist (Shahid Kapur) physically abuses his girlfriend in the name of love and controls her social interactions so that she does not interact with other men. The female lead Priti (Kiara Advani) accepts the abuse as love and does not show any signs of protest. There is a blatant denial of agency and dignity to the woman character. The fact that the movie turned out to be one of the highest-grossing films of 2019 suggests how seamlessly it aligned with prevailing imaginations of heterosexual relationships at the heart of national consciousness.

The use of female bodies to reiterate sexual purity and chastity becomes vociferous in the way rape and sexual assaults have been portrayed in Hindi movies. The depictions of sexual digressions have further reinforced sexual norms, both permissible and prohibited, within hegemonic imaginations of ideal Indian womanhood. The need to preserve laj or izzat, Hindi and Urdu synonyms used to describe a woman’s honor, is expressed through “elaborate, codified behavior patterns that require women to remain secluded, confined to the domestic domain and dependent on the husband” (Gokuksin & Dissanayake 1988, p. 77). Laj is also a woman’s duty (Bagchi 1996) and therefore women need to hide or run to escape from men’s supposedly natural sexual aggression.

Rape stories have always been a popular plot in Hindi cinema. A string of popular movies from the 1960s to 2000s included revenge sagas where the lead hero’s sister or some other woman is raped and the hero takes revenge by killing the rapists. The hero's sister remains the perfect definition of a helpless woman in need of male rescue. The sister’s rape enrages the heroes such as Amitabh Bachchan in Aakhree Rasta, Raj Babbar in Aaj Ki Awaz, and Sunil Shetty in Aaghaaz, unleashing violent vendetta in movies like Mohra, Anth, and Aaghaaz. There are two ways in which the plot develops. One way is the complete demonizing of the rape victim where the assault is construed as a loss of chastity which implies loss of dignity and therefore a life of shame and stigma for the woman. The revenge is to be taken by her protector, the male lead. This narrative can be traced back to ancient texts of Ramayana; when Sita is abducted by Ravana, it is expected of Ram to seek revenge from Ravana by declaring war and rescuing Sita. It is also ironic that Ram asks her to walk through fire as a test to establish her sexual purity, because she had spent a few nights in Ravana’s kingdom. She is eventually abandoned by Rama as there are questions raised about her sexual purity, and even the King has no power to change norms around sexual morality. The objectification of Sita’s body as a site of sexual morality, in order to establish rigid codes of sexual conduct for women in India, has informed hegemonic masculinist constructions of nationalism in India.

In most of the stories, with some exceptions, it is not the heroine who gets raped but the lead hero’s sister or any other woman. It would be unwise to tarnish the image of the heroine who is the object of fantasy of a male viewer in the audience. At the end of the day, there is a deliberate attempt to secure the chastity of the lead actress as she is the ideal Indian woman and her honor belongs to her community or nation; therefore, only a pure woman is acceptable.

**The Reproductive Body in Hindi Cinema**

The role of women as mothers and the appropriation of their reproductive bodies and functions signify their utilitarian purpose in nationalist discourse. Women are denied agency and control over their bodies along with being marginalized in mainstream political discourses. This fetish for a fertile and reproductive body has not only defined broader contours of nationalism but also determined and essentialized the life choices of ordinary women around fulfillment of their roles as mothers. The female body as a site of motherhood is a de-sexualized and passive subject, possessed by men and invoked to demand patriarchal protectionism by her family and nation.
It is impossible to imagine Amitabh Bachchan in *Deewar* (1975) without Nirupa Roy who played her mother or in *Amar, Akbar and Anthony* (1977). Similarly, the story loses its soul if we take out the role of mother Rakhee from *Karan Arjun* (1995) in spite of the presence of mega stars like Shahrukh Khan and Salman Khan. There is no dearth of stories in Hindi cinema where scripts revolve completely around the mother figure and her complex relationship with her children. One of the most iconic dialogues that made this exalted status reach its epoch was between two brothers in the movie *Deewar*. The social oppression and trauma of poverty pushes Vijay to the world of crime whereas younger brother Ravi Verma takes care of his mother and follows the principle of righteousness to become a police officer. When Vijay reminds Ravi of all the worldly comforts and wealth that the former has earned and asks his younger brother “What do you have?”, Ravi replies calmly and confidently, “I have our mother.”

This characterization of motherhood in Hindi cinema has been one of the most powerful representations of the imaginary that defines the masculinist construction of nationalist discourse. A mother is all sacrificing, helpless, often a victim of social oppression, and a desexualized body who has no other goal in life than the well-being of her children. From Nargis in *Mother India* to Jaya Bachchan in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* and from Reema Lagoo in *Maine Pyar Kiya* to Farida Jalal in *DDLJ*, these iconic mothers on screen have portrayed a larger-than-life image which aligns with the exalted status of motherhood in the national consciousness.

A movie that pushed the boundaries of this imagination recently is *Badhaai Ho* (2018). It is a story of a middle-aged couple, Mrs. and Mr. Kaushik, who have two boys; one is an adult and the other is an adolescent. The story gets complex when Mrs. Kaushik gets pregnant again. The visibility of the mother’s sexual agency leads to awkwardness, hostility, and even shame from her own family members. The son is ridiculed by his friends whereas other women in her family shame her for sexual activity. It is the mother-in-law who finally takes a stand and in her powerful monologue declares that a child is not conceived out of thin air. It happens through sex, and there is nothing wrong with a married couple having a child. This film was a radical departure from the norm, depicting a mother who reclaims her sexual agency.

**Conclusion**

In contemporary times, the female body is a site of contradictory subjectivities as a symbol of the neo-liberal economic era as well as the restored traditional value system of India. Her body and agency are caught between various dualisms—embodying a new progress and a glorious past, sexual agency and passivity, continuity and disruption, homogeneity and diversity, eroticism and chastity, and victimization and resistance. However, these contradictions are ultimately contained within the boundaries of masculine hegemonic nationalism. There have also been a few moments of rupture and breaking out of these boundaries in the beginning of the OTT (Over-the-Top) phase of Internet distribution of cinema. India is moving beyond the binaries imagined around women’s bodies and reconceptualizing women’s bodies as a site of transformative politics, resistance, and agency. However, there is a need to deconstruct women’s autonomy as political destiny where the female body acts as a site of symbolism, sexuality, and reproduction to create a grand imagery of nationhood. We need to reimagine women’s bodies as sites of freedom of choice, agency, and resistance to infuse new energies into the idea of nationalism and free it from its hegemonic masculinist moorings.
References


