

Gender Inequality Through the Lens of Representation of Women in Film

A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Films are one of the most widely-consumed forms of media worldwide; thus, they exert a great influence on mindsets. One of these areas is the representation of gender relations. Typically, Hollywood and Bollywood films promote unequal and patriarchal gender representations of men and women, thus reinforcing mainstream practices that place women in an inferior position to men, in terms of their impact on viewers. The aim of the present research study is to analyse two films with atypical representations of the two female protagonists and consider their impact on viewers in the U.S. and India. An in-depth thematic analysis of the Bollywood film *Mom* (2017) and the Hollywood film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) was carried out. It was found that these films challenged the conventional conceptions of male heroes, defied stereotypical representations of women, and redefined gender roles for society through their defiance for stereotypically gendered behaviour and usage of cinematic techniques to show the women to be on par with the men. Additionally, through the protagonist's refusal to conform to conventional gender-based behaviours presented by society, they are able to liberate female viewers by empowering them to think and act beyond the given social restraints. In the future, analyses of film with regards to representations of other genders on the spectrum can be conducted, as well as an assessment on the use

of cinematic techniques in their portrayals of other genders in one film to see if any such biases occur.

Keywords

Gender, gender roles, stereotypes, gender representation, sexual harassment

Introduction

Films are one of the most widely consumed forms of media in this digital age: they hold great power in terms of influencing people's perception of the world, society, and others in general. One of the areas where films can exert an influence on viewer perceptions is gender relationships. Unfortunately, many Hollywood films tend to reinforce gender stereotypes prevalent in society. These stereotypes usually place women in an inferior light when compared to men. Even when these female characters are professionals like doctors, lawyers, and architects, the focus in films tends to be placed on women's conventional roles, specifically those of a mother, wife, daughter, girlfriend. This furthers the stereotype that a woman's role in society is to be nothing more than a supporting character rather than their own star.

The establishment of the gender stereotypical representation of women in films is reflected in the fact that despite the evolution of content and cinematic techniques in films over time, the primary representation of women as objects of desire can be found in Hollywood films since the inception of the *James Bond* series (1962-present), thereby inspiring new stereotypes, or reinforcing. This introduces the concept of the 'Male Gaze' in film wherein the female characters are usually displayed as sexual objects of desire for the characters in the filmed

story, as well as for the male audience of the filmed story (Mulvey, 1975). Films like *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), and the *Transformers* series (2007-present), are films where the male gaze is highly prevalent with the female characters looked upon as sexual desires – Megan Fox leans over a car engine as the camera pans over her body, Margot Robbie's character in itself is based on high sex-appeal. This kind of cinematic representation of women hones in on the sexuality of the women rather than what their characters have to offer to progress the plot of the film.

Let's take a look at the representation of women in the recent hit Hollywood film, *Suicide Squad* (2016). Harley Quinn, played by Australian actress Margot Robbie, is the only female on the supervillain team "Task Force X." Throughout the film, she is overtly sexualised because she is often scantily clad. In fact, female characters are usually displayed as sexual objects of desire for the characters and the male audience of the filmed story, which brings to life the concept of the 'Male Gaze.' Yang et al. (2020) found that a contributing factor to the concept of 'male gaze' is the gender of the film crew. We see this through the films *Suicide Squad* and *Birds of Prey*. *Suicide Squad* was directed and scripted by an exclusively male crew, while *Birds of Prey* was directed and scripted by an exclusively female crew. Compared to *Suicide Squad*, we see a much less sexualised representation of the female

supervillain Harley Quinn in *Birds of Prey*, wherein the focus is not on her body or outfits, but more on her character and adventures.

Another way whereby films have undercut women to reinforce gender stereotypes is through their negative portrayals of powerful women who have risen up the highest echelons of society. For instance, in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), the character of Miranda Priestly is negatively portrayed as an icy, heartless career-oriented woman who is the editor-in-chief of the high-end fashion magazine *Runway*, whose second marriage is hanging by a thread. Priestly is vilified for her lack of focus on her marriage as we see her completely absorbed in her career throughout the film. Furthermore, everyone at her workplace (with the focus on Andrea Sachs played by Anne Hathaway) is terrified of Miranda and her sharp tongue as she figuratively assumes the titular role of the film.

What is even more disturbing is that these stereotypical beliefs about women and their position in society are inculcated in children from an early age, when you look at the likes of Disney films, such as the original animated films like *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). All of them show the dependency of a woman, or a young girl, on a man to save her from her predicament. Snow White, after being forced to live in the woods because of her evil stepmother (another film stereotype), lives with seven dwarf men as their 'housemaid'.

Eventually, she is at the mercy of a young prince to save her from her deathbed. where she is saved by the prince's "true love's kiss" This shows the stereotyped idea of men being women's 'protectors' or 'saviours', or of women's dependence on men. Similarly, Cinderella, the titular character of her film, is made to live as a servant in her own home because of her evil stepmother and stepsisters. Ultimately, because of a ball thrown by the French Royalty, Cinderella is rescued from her life of misery by Prince Charming putting a glass slipper onto her foot and claiming her as his wife.

What do the messages of these films convey for the young female audiences watching them? Essentially, what constitutes a "happy ending" for women is being saved by a "prince." Otherwise, they would be condemned to a life of domestication, where they are subjected to any unjust or exploitative treatment meted out to them. This one-sided representation of women reinforces a regressive stereotype in films and society, which fails to put forth alternative portraits of women in society and possibilities of "happy endings" for them, such as becoming scientists, astronauts, and doctors, that is, no different from their male counterparts.

Of course, Hollywood is not alone in its gender stereotypical projections of women. Another culprit is Bollywood. Specifically, Mubarak (2019) clearly identified the majority of roles that women held in the last 70 years of

the Indian film industry – “the sacrificing mother, whimpering damsel in distress,” or the “pretty visual relief from the action,” show through heroines in sheer *sarees* dancing in the rain, and ‘item songs’ that are there for no other reason than to appeal to male viewers, thereby bringing in the concept of male gaze once again (Mulvey 1975; Nair 2017). Films like *R... Rajkumar* (2013), *Raanjhanaa* (2013), the *Masti* series (2004-2016), the *Housefull* series (2010-2019), and *Kabir Singh* (2019) depict women as trophy items, objects for sexual desire, or the property of men. *Raanjhanaa* glorifies and rewards the results of stalking and harassing women by having the leading lady fall in love with her stalker because of his ‘romantic pursuits’. And the *Masti* series and *Housefull* series are solely based on men lusting over women and being praised for it. The film *Sonu ke Titu ki Sweety* (2018) depicts the female lead, Sweety, as being some sort of villainous gold-digger whose only purpose is to cause a feud between Titu and his best friend Sonu, another favourite plot-point in Bollywood – the female is always the villain.

A lot of this representation has to do with the strongly-held patriarchal beliefs that have dominated Indian society since time immemorial. These include beliefs like men are the head of the family and are responsible for all decisions to be taken for and about the family including but not limited to education, marriage, employment etc. regardless of their involvement

with daily duties of the family. Others include women being resigned to a life of domestic duties like childbearing, cooking, and cleaning rather than focusing on their own ambitions, and that they must remain subservient and docile regarding all matters (Hassel et al., 2011).

At the same time, films where women have been represented as independent, in-charge of their own destiny, and more than objects of male desire, like in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), they have been banned by the Indian Censor Board for depicting just that – women independent of any man, and free to live their life on their own terms. A letter issued by the Central Board of Film Certification stated their reason for the ban was that the film was, “lady oriented, their fantasy above life.” This raises conflict as to how the film industry wants to show progression of women and their representation, but they receive backlash for the same when our patriarchal systems are threatened, or they show progressive plots and female characters in a rather disappointing manner. But apart from a change in character roles and storylines, what other aspects contribute to more accurate and progressive representations of women onscreen?

In an attempt to answer this question, one must turn their attention to films that show an empowering representation of women on-screen, even if it is not in a conventional manner. Be it showing women in positions of power or giving women control behind the

camera as opposed to men, films are a powerful medium for us as a society to show how the boundaries of gender relations can be pushed to challenge conventional gender stereotypes. For this reason, I have analysed the Bollywood film *Mom* (2017) starring Sridevi as the titular character, and the Hollywood film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) starring Frances McDormand as the lead role. These films depict our leading ladies as powerful women on the pursuit of justice after their daughters were violently sexually abused and denied justice by law enforcements. However, these films upturn the very idea of gender and gendered behaviour as one sees Sridevi's character, Devki Sabarwal, and Frances McDormand's character, Mildred Hayes, use gruesome, violent, and stereotypically masculine methods to rightfully get what was denied. *Mom* and *Billboards* changed the way that women have been represented in the film industry for decades, and act as evidence that in order to be equally represented and respected, women do not need to compromise any aspect of their personal or professional lives, or their femininity.

Methodology

Research Aim and Research Approach

This research study aims to capture the representation of women in films through a cinematic lens from the perspective of the American and Indian society, as well as how these perceptions of gender roles, norms and stereotypes are received and interpreted by audiences. An in-depth analysis of the two films *Mom* (2017) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) was conducted.

Data Collection & Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to compare the Bollywood film *Mom* (2017) and the Hollywood film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) was used in this study. Apart from the storyline and general character arc, the analysis focuses on the representation of women in terms of cinematography – the artistic representation of women through camera angles, lighting, costume and set design, music, and colour schemes – and these cinematic elements reinforce the atypical defy gender stereotypical representations of the two female protagonists.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1

Themes Found Through Data Analysis

Number	Theme
1	Challenging Conventional Conceptions of Male Heroes
2	Defying Conventional Stereotypical Representation of Women
3	Redefining Gender Roles for Society

Theme 1: Challenging Conventional Conceptions of Male Heroes

As is seen in most films of the past and even the present, there is always a male hero who comes to rescue the damsel in distress. However, in *Mom* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, our damsels were their very own knights in shining armour. The male figures, be it the fathers or policemen, were mostly absent or fairly dormant when it came to seeking justice for the victims in the films, even if they were their own daughters. They were there either to emotionally support their daughter, as in *Mom* or to amplify the strength in character of the mothers. In *Mom*, Anand Sabarwal, played by Adnan Siddiqui, was on a business trip when his daughter was violently

assaulted, and upon his return, he simply sat beside his daughter’s bed and cried – paralysed by the horrific incident that had taken place. Apart from appealing to the courts and acting as emotional support to his daughter – both actions which are incredibly important in this kind of situation – Adnan remained relatively inactive compared to Devki who was on her own mission to seek justice. While Devki found intricate and almost murderous ways of seeking justice, Anand still relied on the flawed and unbudging ways of the justice system. In a similar manner, in the film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, Mildred Hayes, mother of the victim Angela Hayes, was the only parent who was actively involved in avenging her daughter. When failed by the law, Mildred took matters

into her own hands by renting out three billboards on a rather abandoned road to call out the inefficiency of the police force in solving her daughter's case. She had separated from her abusive husband who, so far, had been completely absent in his family's life, even when his daughter was brutally assaulted and murdered. The first time he appeared was after he saw Mildred on the news with her billboards and advised her to take them down for the sake of Chief Willoughby's reputation. Although he "felt" for his daughter's case, he did not take any action to help catch the culprit and told Mildred to step back from the case.

In both films, the law proved to be inadequate in meting out justice for the victims of sexual abuse. When the women appealed for further investigation, they were told not to meddle with the situation any further. Subsequently, the women, rather the mothers, took matters into their own hands and set out to seek justice for their daughters. Through the film, one sees these mothers transform into heroes. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines the word "hero" as "a person, especially a man, who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good." These women were neither admired by others nor considered to be doing something brave or good. They had been warned, threatened, and even harassed by others to quit their vengeful mission in the pursuit of justice. Even the mothers did not see themselves as heroes; they

simply saw themselves as ordinary mothers who were trying to avenge their daughters.

When viewed from a cinematic aspect, in the initial scenes of the film *Mom*, the men were always filmed in medium shots from a lower angle to show the conventional power and authority that their characters hold, and the women were filmed from medium shots with a higher angle to show a kind of inferiority. This aims to show a weaker or more vulnerable aspect of the character. Take, for example, the scene between Adnan and Devki when he is leaving for his business trip to New York. The couple is standing and talking to each other at eye level, yet while filming, Devki is filmed from Adnan's perspective almost as if he is looking down at her and she is looking up at him. This helped in establishing a power dynamic which was later reversed when Aarya was in hospital, and then Adnan was looking up at Devki – portrayed as helpless and hopeless – as they were both in shock over the horrific incident. The purpose of these medium shots is to emphasize both the actor and their surroundings by clearly showing the actor's emotions as well as keeping the audience informed of what is going on around them. This runs in contrast to how scenes were filmed in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. In this film, a majority of the shots were medium close-ups of the various characters be it Mildred Hayes, her son, Chief Willoughby, Dixon, or even Red. These shots aim to show the facial

expressions of the actors to fully convey their emotions to the audience. Close up shots also help in drawing attention to certain details of a person or object that the director wishes to emphasize. For example, when Mildred Hayes was confronted in her gift shop by a passerby who showed apathy for her daughter, the shot used to show Mildred's expression is a close-up. One could see the anger and ferocity on her face, but even the slightest twitch in her expressions showed her fear, vulnerability, and extreme sadness. These kinds of details would have otherwise been missed if the scene was shot from a distance.

Theme 2: Defying Conventional Stereotypical Representation of Women

Even more significantly, the two female protagonists are unified by their stark defiance of the conventional gender-stereotypical representation of women. Throughout history, the portrayals of males and females have been characterised by certain gender stereotypes that prevent them from stepping out of, or going against, these stereotypes. Specifically, males are typically expected to project qualities such as strength, determination, courage, leadership, bravery, independence, and many more; whereas, women tend to be portrayed as sensitive, gentle, affectionate, warm, nurturing, and passive, amongst other traits.

Despite the fact that Devki and Mildred were driven by their motherly instincts to avenge their daughters, their actions were, by no means,

woman-like. In Mildred's case, instead of simply feeling disempowered by the lack of progress in her daughter's case, she sought to pressure the police force to prioritise her daughter's case by renting out three billboards with provocative messages – “Raped while dying,” “And still no arrests?” “How come, Chief Willoughby?” – which culminated in her accusation of the failure of the local police chief for failing to solve her daughter's case. In renting these billboards, Mildred had decided to take on the male-dominated, highly conservative town she lived in. Various men tried to intimidate Mildred into giving up: Chief Willoughby brought her in for questioning, her dentist outright attacked her, and her ex-husband burnt down her billboards after nearly attacking Mildred in her own home, simply to threaten her into giving up her fight. Even though she was intimidated, she did not back down.

Mildred's daring defiance of the collective will of the patriarchy was amplified by how she is filmed. Specifically, she was filmed in medium or close-up shots at the eye level, on par with that of her male counterparts. This artistic decision captured Mildred's determined perception of herself as an equal to the men. The close-up shots captured Mildred's display of tremendous emotional control, power and authority – traits typically associated with men. She maintained a stern, stony, and unflinching look on her face: her jaw taut with seriousness, her eyes seemingly cold and

emotionless yet burning with rage, and an overall expression of an unrelenting mother deprived of her right to justice.

A quintessential example of how the filming of Mildred placed her at the same level as the male characters is the scene where Mildred was taken to the police station. Chief Willoughby and Detective Dixon brought Mildred in for an interrogation after she “drilled a hole” into Dr. Jeffrey’s (her dentist) finger, in self-defence, when he attempted to extract her tooth without using anaesthesia. He performed this ‘surgery’ while telling Mildred how the town was filled with several of Willoughby’s friends who would not stand for his humiliation. This power dynamic, with Dr. Jeffrey towering over Mildred with an instrument sharp enough to kill, was an attempt to show Jeffrey threatening Mildred into giving up her fight. Even though during interrogation Chief Willoughby was sitting on the table and looking down at Mildred, she was filmed looking up at him from an eye-level shot. The usage of this angle creates the effect of Mildred steeling herself and not buckling under intimidation. When questioned about why Mildred attacked Dr. Jeffrey, she responded with how it was “his word against [hers]” to belittle their argument or make it seem like the incident never took place. Rather than focusing on the reason behind Mildred’s actions, Chief Willoughby chose to focus on how he would ensure that Mildred would not be able to take further action on her daughter’s case by

“tying [Mildred] up in court so long” that she would not “have a penny to pay for another month’s billboards.” Not only was Chief Willoughby digressing from the real matter at hand – Mildred’s daughter’s case – but he was outright threatening her to end her fight or else he would end it for her. Even though Mildred was fighting day and night to receive justice for her daughter, the very people who were supposed to deliver that justice were more concerned with protecting their own reputation than protecting the law and the people under it.

Another subtle similarity between Mildred’s behaviour and the men in the film was the kind of language used. Both genders used equally vulgar and explicit language. While one may not consider this to be a behaviour of any significance, the usage of vulgar language is conventionally deemed “unladylike,” and more often than not, women are criticised for using foul language (Güvendir, 2015). These portrayals helped to emphasise Mildred’s “manly nature.”

Mildred went as far as burning down the police station while “at war” with the people unable to serve justice. This was probably the most glaring depiction of Mildred’s “manly” or “unwomanly” nature. Dressed as a hoodlum wearing a hooded jacket, pants, and a headscarf or bandana, Mildred was virtually indistinguishable from a male youth committing a crime. She stuffed a bottle of alcohol with some tissue paper, lit it on fire, and flung it from

Welby's office so that it crashed through the windows of the police station and set it on fire. She was so fixated on solving her daughter's case through such explicit or public methods that she did not even take the time to grieve and receive emotional support from those around her, and instead chose to suppress her emotions.

With Devki, her portrayal of her "unwomanly" side had a twist, as we could see her concocting cyanide from apple seeds in a kitchen – the quintessential place where women belong in the traditional conception of gender roles. In this scene, Devki attempted to frame one of the culprits, Mohit, for poisoning another culprit, Charles, thus taking down two birds with one stone. We could see Devki working swiftly and methodically, displaying extreme precision and complete concentration, shown through the swift and stable camera movements, and suspenseful background music. She left apple seeds in the kitchen sink, apple slices in the dustbin, and the homemade-cyanide in the blender to produce incriminating evidence against Mohit, who happened to be one of her students and her step-daughter's classmate. She even used Mohit's computer to research how to make cyanide, making sure to change the date and time on his laptop to disrupt the timeline of his alibi, before setting off the fire alarm in his apartment to bring the police and fire brigade there. Similar to Mildred's disguise, Devki set out for Charles' home dressed in a hooded jacket, making her virtually indistinguishable

from any other person on the street – male or female.

The illumination of Devki's non-feminine side was also captured cinematically through changes in the elements of the backgrounds of the scenes she appeared in. One such element was the colour of the lighting. In the initial scenes of the film, Devki was illuminated with warm orange lighting, which showed her loving nature, as evidenced in the scenes at the dinner table where she joked around with her younger daughter about being able to see everything with her ten eyes, or when she brought Aarya her dinner to her room after having a small argument. However, this warm orange colour gave way to cool green lighting and suspenseful music when Devki was carrying out her plan of revenge to show her determination to avenge her step-daughter's rape, be it planning the castration of Baburam (the security guard at the party Aarya was abducted from) in his intoxicated state, poisoning Charles' protein shake, or framing Mohit for poisoning Charles.

Another cinematic approach was the camera angle used for Devki. It was usually a close-up from a lower angle or an eye-level shot, which conveyed Devki's sense of power and control over the situation, in contrast to the typical power dynamic between men and women. For instance, in her interactions with the culprits, the camera angle used for her showed the culprits to appear vulnerable in front of a

woman who seemed to be unstoppable in her pursuit of justice. Similar to the scenes in the beginning of the film, Devki and her husband Anand are filmed at different angles, except this time, Devki was the one filmed from an eye-level or low-angle shot to establish her proactive and more dominating role in her step-daughter's case. If we look at the scene where Devki was off to poison Charles' protein shake, we can see the juxtaposition of power. While Devki was filmed at an eye-level angle as she was on her pursuit of justice, Anand was sitting on the couch arguing on the phone with an officer of the law. He was left at the mercy of that officer, who seemed to be neither interested in the case nor willing to push it forward, and Anand's helplessness was shown by the usage of a high-angle shot. This was also a contrast to Anand's state both during and after the court case. In these scenes, even though he was powerless with regards to the verdict of the case, he was still hopeful for as long as possible, shown through the usage of eye-level shots of him crying in his car as well as low-angle shots of him in court listening to the verdict. From there on, we saw a literal and cinematic shift in the power and control between Devki and Anand.

Devki's interaction with Charles while he was hospitalised furthers the representation of her "manly" nature primarily through cinematic means. This was achieved through the utilisation of the Dutch angle, or the tilted camera angle,

which aimed to create a sense of tension and uneasiness within the viewer, and emphasised the fact that Devki would go to any means necessary to exact justice for her step-daughter. This also helped in portraying a role-reversal of the stereotypical power dynamic between man and woman, or Devki and Charles. Here, Charles was vulnerable and left powerless due to his paralysis, and Devki was in a position to inflict more harm on Charles, thus giving her the upper hand. This helped to bring Devki's stereotypical "manly" nature into the spotlight, where she became the one threatening Charles – by leaving a sliced apple at the side of his hospital bed to show that she was the one responsible for his paralysed state. The overall atmosphere of this particular scene was discomfort and danger, as the Dutch angle was used from the very beginning of the scene till the very end. It was accompanied by a consistent circular motion of filming with Devki as the main subject, focusing on her emotions of rage and fury, and helps to show us just how unrelenting Devki was in taking down her targets, one by one.

In this manner, we were able to see how neither Devki nor Mildred conformed to conventional gender binary notions, behaviours, or representations of women in film during their pursuit for justice.

Theme 3: Redefining Gender Roles for Society

The story of a hero taking matters into his own hands to avenge the heinous death of a loved one and fighting for justice, especially when they have been wrongly denied it, abounds in the movies. But what may not be so straightforward is the image of a mother avenging her daughter using violent means. This question was brought up by the on-screen representations of Devki and Mildred. The fact that most of us struggle with female protagonists exacting revenge in the manner that we have come to associate with their male counterparts shows the extent to which we ourselves have been conditioned by gender stereotypes in how we perceive males and females in real and reel life. Therefore, in this theme, we consider how these characters in the reel world could be challenging conventional gender roles for us in the real world.

For a start, female viewers watching Devki and Mildred take the lead on screen may be experiencing a deep sense of liberation that frees them from mainstream society's limitations on their behaviour. In a patriarchal society that has always positioned women in a passive and submissive position vis-a-vis men, watching these protagonists must have seemed refreshing from the typical male heroes depicted on screen. By stepping out of their stereotypical images, Devki and Mildred were female role models who truly existed outside any predefined

categories of what it means to be a woman. They showed that being a woman does not mean being submissive, overly-emotional, or giving away under pressure. Being a woman means being your own hero, and even one for others, in times of need. It means being strong-willed, confident in your own abilities, unafraid to challenge authority when necessary, taking the lead, and not being dependent on others to solve your problems. Despite the danger that they knew they were getting themselves into, Devki and Mildred continued on their pursuit of justice in their own ways, relentlessly, undeterred by the obstacles that the male characters put in their path to intimidate them.

The powerful impact of strong portrayals of women in films on females in real life is also affirmed by psychologists. According to social worker Silvia M. Dutchevici, president and founder of Critical Therapy Center in N.Y.C., "The way women are depicted in film and television influences consciously and subconsciously the way both girls and boys understand what it means to be a woman." Whether this effect is conscious or unconscious, it would seem this transformation can take place in a deep-seated fashion, which is described by social cognitive psychologist, April Seifert:

The more strong women we see in films and other places, the more our brains will start to automatically associate 'strength' as a feminine trait, and as a result, the more

women will be treated as strong, equal members of society.

Therefore, more than just a passive witnessing of females who behave outside the box, female viewers who come away with a sense of empowerment could be looking to their own lives to see where they would take back control and take charge of their own destiny. They would feel empowered to adopt a different attitude in their own world – one that is characterised by a sense of courage about challenging a predominant patriarchal society.

An important outcome of females' transformation of their attitude in redefining their gender stereotypical conceptions of their roles in society is to fight against the widespread misogyny. This phenomenon – an entrenched part of mainstream society – is manifested in horrifying statistics, such as the fact that a woman in India is raped nearly every five hours, while the conviction rate is below 30% (The Times of India par. 8).

In the United States, 1 out of every 6 American women have been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (14.8% completed, 2.8% attempted) (RAINN, n.d.). It is important to point out that the prevalence of crimes like the rapes of women does not lie at the heart of the issue. Rather, these crimes are symptomatic of the misogyny and sexism so ingrained in our cultures and society that people feel entitled to mistreat and abuse women. Moral policing of women and

victim-blaming are two common practices that inculcate a 'rape-culture' further feed this entitlement of misogyny. Common statements heard are, "What were you wearing," "Were you drinking," "Why were you out so late," "You were asking for it." This makes it seem like the victim is at fault for the crime rather than the offender(s) themselves – something we see in *Mom* when Aarya's statement is denied due to negligible alcohol content in her blood system, despite the fact that she was severely injured and hospitalised while giving her statement.

The misogyny and the systems' failure to capture and punish the perpetrators, portrayed in the films, were very much mirrored in reality. There is no question that the Indian female viewers could relate to the Kathua Rape Case (2018), the Unnao Rape Case (2017), the Muzzafarpur Shelter Home Case (2018), and the most infamous and horrifying being the Nirbhaya Rape Case (2012) wherein the court case went on for over 7 years before the accused were found guilty ("Unnao, Hathras," 2021). In a majority of these cases, the victims are either mutilated, burnt, murdered, or left to die. In a sense, the audacity of Mildred and Devki to do something about this abject violence against women and inadequacies of the systemic response can be considered an effective tool for pushing female viewers to break out of the prescribed norms of being women, to feel the outrage and protest actively against it, instead of acquiescing to this state of affairs.

At the end of the day, while Devki and Mildred would still be considered to be “extreme” role models for females (and males, for that matter), their actions are commensurate with the level of the outrage that has been perpetuated against their loved ones and their families. Films like *Mom and Billboards* provide us with a powerful vehicle for us to examine our own humanity and question our social consciousness. These are the questions that viewers, both female *and* male, must confront deep within ourselves. In the face of violence and gross injustices committed against our loved ones, can we stay within the parameters of the prescribed norms of mainstream society and still look ourselves in the eye with pride? Or should we too be taking matters into our own hands so that we can feel empowered in the face of such abject hopelessness? Certainly, for a woman, there is no doubt that the films sound a vital clarion call for her to shed the shackles of male dominance and transform her attitude.

Conclusion

The aim of this research study was to explore the representation of gender, specifically women, in film through a cinematic lens and its impact on viewers’ perceptions of women. In particular, this research study conducted a comparative analysis of films – *Mom* (2017) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) – to bring out the similarities and realistic representations of women in two different

societies – India and the U.S. – and their respective impacts on viewers.

Devki and Mildred – the protagonists of their respective films – who went to significant lengths to seek justice for their daughters, victims of rape, are striking in defying the fundamental gender stereotypes and norms of women as being feminine and gentle in their roles, as wives and mothers, in society. Instead, these characters adopted a no-holds-barred approach in seeking revenge, resorting to whatever they deemed necessary to pursue due justice.

Similarly, in more recent times, conventional gender stereotypes have given way to more varied representations of female characters in films from the 2010s with films being more women-centric in terms of the cast and crew. This includes Indian films that genuinely depict women’s issues like *Pink* (2016) and *Thappad* (2020), or Disney films that show the independence of women like in *Brave* (2012) and *Moana* (2016) that lead to a feeling of empowerment among women. This comes from women breaking gender stereotypes in real life, leading to a more diverse and accurate representation in reel life. Female CEOs, doctors, lawyers, film directors, scientists, and other professionals have been taking center-stage in recent times, talking about obstacles they have faced in society to reach their position, and issues they continue to face (UN India, 2021). These issues range from the

gender pay-gap to unequal job opportunities to sexual harassment and brings to light the harsh realities of problems faced by women worldwide (Nair 2017).

Female directors like Chloé Zhao (*Eternals*, *Nomadland*), Zoya Akhtar (*Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, *Dil Dhadakne Do*), and Meghna Gulzar (*Chhapaak*, *Raazi*) have been gaining more recognition and appreciation with their visually enthralling films, progressive storylines, and powerful female characters. Films like *Kahaani* (2012), *Queen* (2013), *Piku* (2015), *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Ocean's 8* (2018) and *Captain Marvel* (2019), have been revered for their powerful female leads or full-female cast, and have set a path for an increase in female representation on and off-screen (Nair 2017).

Ultimately, what made these two films (*Mom* and *Billboards*) stand out to viewers is the extent to which we have been socially conditioned to have specific expectations of individuals of different genders. After all, if one were to really think about it, there is really nothing new for the viewers about the theme of parents seeking revenge for their children. For instance, the father figure in the movie *Taken* (2008), who sought out to find his missing daughter in Paris, is one of several “father” characters who resorts to violence at all costs to seek justice for their children or wives. It is a theme that is also reminiscent of men avenging the death of their girlfriends and wives.

Essentially, these films are repeating a formula with the replacement of male protagonists as females. The conventional reactions of viewers and the reflexive shock that we experience in our sensibilities in watching *Devki* and *Mildred* clearly testifies to our unconscious bias and the double standards we have in our society.

This is why *Devki* and *Mildred*, in their refusal to conform to the limits that society and men impose on them, truly liberate female viewers by empowering them to think and act beyond their conventional restraints. This opens many doors for them, in terms of how they can approach their own lives. Specifically, females can feel freed from the need to adhere to the male-imposed standards of behaviour. Furthermore, our protagonists' reactions in these films also highlight how the mainstream society has failed women in the inadequacies of the legal systems and structures for addressing crimes against the treatment of women. Ultimately, *Devki* and *Mildred* took matters into their own hands, not because they were uncontrolled and unrestrained, but because the law enforcement and/or the justice systems had let them down.

The results obtained from this analysis could be useful for conducting studies that deal with societal stereotypes in the future as well as tap into the usefulness of film as a vehicle for offering vivid social commentary and providing an alternative vision for an ideal society. Here are some specific recommendations:

1. Analyse other films (i.e., 2020 onwards) with regards to representations of other genders such as gender non-binary and gender fluid characters.
2. Delve specifically into the impact of cinematic techniques in their portrayals of other gendered characters (male, female, gender non-binary, gender fluid, gender non-conforming etc.) in one film to determine whether there are any biases.
3. Examine what it would take to create a film in which non-discriminatory gender representation approaches are taken with regards to the cast and crew, roles played and their purposes, as well as the storyline itself, among other aspects.

Given the fact that more people are advocating for gender equality in various fields, especially in media, there is better and more accurate representations of women in film such as more female-led content, storylines revolving around more than just romance, abuse or helplessness, more female directors, producers and other crew members gaining prominence. These representations are also reflected in society, as there is growing pressure towards redressing the abusive treatment of women and improving gender parity. These two aspects – film and society – could mutually reinforce one another towards greater progressive change to challenge gender stereotypes and make society a better place.

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