

(Indian) Girl Rising?

Challenging Traditional Femininity in Contemporary Bollywood Films

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Abstract:

This paper examines selected work by three Bollywood actors, Vidya Balan, Anushka Sharma, and Priyanka Chopra, and the ways in which this work challenges gender stereotypes. It also examines the manner in which critical and commercial reception of these films, and media coverage of the actors themselves, contribute to the conversation around gender in Bollywood and in Indian society more broadly. Arguably, actors such as these have helped to ensure that depictions of femininity and feminism in Bollywood have changed, but within significant constraints. Their feminism relies on a performance of femininity, nationalism and self-sacrifice that fits hegemonic expectations, dismissing differences of caste, geography, and religion. As long as this remains the case, the effects of this progress remain limited for the actors and for audiences alike, but it is nonetheless a sign of the ways in which Bollywood pushes forward transnational conversations about social conventions yet remains stubbornly mired in the past.

Keywords: Gender; Indian cinema; feminism; Bollywood films; Indian femininity

“Girls just need the chance and the opportunity and they will top every field, not just sports.”

Mary Kom (2014)

A number of studies have looked critically at the portrayal of gender in Bollywood films, including the way that this portrayal has evolved over time and how gender intersects with nationality, ethnicity and caste in these films (Ghaznavi, Grasso & Taylor, 2017; Manohar & Kline, 2014; Sharma & Malhotra, 2018). Some of these studies (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004; Prasad, 1998; Schaefer & Karan, 2011) have also argued that Bollywood has changed over time, with more graphic and sympathetic depictions of premarital sex, adultery, and pregnancy outside of marriage, and yet these changes have done little to alleviate the sense from some audience members that Bollywood portrays gender problematically (Hirji, 2010; Ram, 2014). In this paper, I look closely at selected work by three Bollywood actors who can be seen as making conscious choices—on-screen and off—in terms of challenging gender stereotypes.

The actors in question are Vidya Balan, Anushka Sharma, and Priyanka Chopra, each of whom has a different public persona, but who demonstrate some similarities in their decisions to accept unconventional roles (for example, Balan in *Kahaani*, Sharma in *NH10* and *Sultan*, Chopra in *Aitraaz*, *Mary Kom* and even the American television show *Quantico*), and who share privileged positions in terms of caste, class and religion. While they sometimes win accolades for their attempts to move outside of traditional gender boundaries, all three seem to attract some degree of ambivalence from critics and audiences, related in part to the way they navigate their image, sense of nationalism and adherence to traditional femininity in the offscreen world. In this paper, I suggest that depictions of femininity and feminism in Bollywood have changed, but still within significant constraints, so that the actors themselves must drive the change and do so utilizing a performance of femininity, nationalism and self-sacrifice that fits in with audience expectations. As long as this remains the case, the effects of this progress remain limited for the actors and for audiences alike, but it is nonetheless a significant sign of the ways in which Bollywood both pushes forward transnational conversations about social conventions, and remains stubbornly mired in the past.

When Good Girls Go “Bad”: Indian Cinema and Gendered Expectations

The subject of gender in popular South Asian films has long been debated. Women in these films often tend to occupy certain familiar roles: nurturing mother, loyal wife, dutiful daughter, sexy vamp or insipid heroine (Dwyer, 2000; Pendakur, 2003; Sharma & Malhotra, 2018; Viridi, 2003). One of the most notable tropes equates female heroines with India herself, wherein women are essentialized maternal figures whose salvation and ability to preserve/transmit culture is tied to that of Mother India (Mishra, 2002). Female characters who depart from these categories often revert back to one of them before the end of the film or are somehow punished for their transgression.

Since 1957, when *Mother India* (Khan, 1957) impressed itself powerfully on the nation’s consciousness with its classic tale of a mother’s sacrifice for India, built around a beleaguered woman who kills her son for the greater good, the ideal woman in many Indian films has been one with strong filial ties. Ideally, she is a loving wife and self-sacrificing mother (Mishra, 2002; Viridi, 2003). Sacrifice and suffering seem to be essential elements for some mothers in popular Indian

films. *Mother India* is perhaps one of the most classic films depicting Indian motherhood, featuring Nargis as long-suffering single mother Radha, who is figuratively the mother of her village. In *Mother India*, as in many other popular Indian films, central female characters are equated with the nation itself. A similar occurrence takes place in the film *Fanaa* (Kohli, 2006), in which the heroine kills her husband and the father of her child upon discovering that he is a Kashmiri terrorist. Likewise, in *Fiza* (Mohamed, 2000), the heroine shoots her brother, a victim of discrimination who became a terrorist, knowing that there is no safe place left for him to occupy within the Indian state (see Hirji, 2010). Unlike *Mother India*, however, where the murdered son is Hindu, the men killed in *Fanaa* and *Fiza* are Muslim, and yet in all three cases the nation that is affirmed is an essentialized Hindu nation—threats have been expunged by loyal female protagonists.

In a sense, the actors who are the subject of this paper often borrow from these onscreen tropes—sublimation of one’s needs, filial piety, unwavering nationalism—but they also adapt them to create composite characters who subvert expectations, offering a significant counterpart to the masculine characters whose machismo has made them the more heroic figures historically (Ghaznavi, Grasso & Taylor, 2017; Sharma & Malhotra, 2018). In the films I examine here, the actors Vidya Balan, Priyanka Chopra and Anushka Sharma instigate conversations and debates that are very much about the Indian feminine and feminism in Bollywood, even when they pursue projects outside of that film industry or outside of the popular song-and-dance genre.

All three present themselves as proponents of women’s rights, though their work often fails to acknowledge their privileged position as high-caste Hindu women from metropolitan areas in an industry and a country where gender must be understood in conjunction with caste, religion and geography. They have reached a stage in their careers where they might star in conventional Bollywood vehicles and earn a substantial living while incurring minimal backlash, but instead each has chosen projects, including ones that they have produced themselves, that challenge representations of the contemporary Indian woman. This is not to suggest that any of these actors is consistently working on feminist productions. Indeed, I argue here that the success they have had is in part because they do conform to hegemonic narratives in significant ways, including their femininity, their heterosexuality and their devout patriotism, even though they are now past the stage of having to establish themselves.

I draw upon the content of selected films, interviews and film reviews to make a case that the actors have pushed the boundaries of discussion around the spaces that women occupy in Indian society, but have done so while performing gender—on-screen and off—in a way that is socially acceptable. Thus, the Indian feminine, as performed by these women in Bollywood, is rendered strong, complex, engaging and utterly contradictory in its approach to equity and justice for all women.

“Wind in My Hair”: Performing Gender in Bollywood & Beyond

Back in India, [Priyanka Chopra] made her name playing controversial women, such as a model who smokes and sleeps around in 2008’s *Fashion*, at a time when, she says, “leading ladies were supposed to be shy and coy and never say anything and look pretty and have wind in our hair. I still love wind in my hair.... But I really wanted to change the game a little.”

(Yuan, 2017)

All of the actors discussed here have sought to change the game, in part by moving into production and assuming more control over the stories they tell. Priyanka Chopra, the former beauty queen who is perhaps the best-known female Indian movie and television star in the world, has headlined an American television show, *Quantico*, but even she notes in this 2017 interview how difficult it is to secure major roles when both gender and race work against her, an intersectional identity challenge experienced by many women of colour (Crenshaw in Desai, 2004). The roles that have garnered the most attention are ones where she seemingly disrupts convention—and yet affirms a number of nationalist and gendered norms. Certainly, Chopra seems to have given significant thought to how her profile might extend over various genres, and how she might distinguish herself from other equally attractive, talented actors in Bollywood.

In the 2004 movie *Aitraaz* (Abbas-Mustan), Chopra broke through as a glamorous, amoral seductress, the natural evolution of Bollywood's vamps. Like Vidya in *Kahaani* and Meera in *NH10*, Sonia is childless, and in her case, by choice. Unlike the romantic leads in most Bollywood films, she rejected the notion of marriage and motherhood, choosing to abort the child fathered by the protagonist, Raj, who later becomes the victim of Sonia's sexual harassment. In a culture where women are defined by their ability to birth and nurture the next generation and to pass on traditions and heritage (Pendakur, 2003; Viridi, 2003), Sonia's ambition and choices doom her. While Chopra admits that she found the role stressful to play, following it up with a range of more socially acceptable portrayals (Chopra, 2005), she kept some aspects of Sonia in subsequent roles, positioning herself for her own cross-over attempt in Hollywood as well as a greater profile in Bollywood.

In *Fashion* (Bhandarkar, 2008), Chopra's character Meghna, a model, engages in an extramarital affair and has an abortion, earning familial disapproval and romantic abandonment, but eventually she returns, as good Indian girls do, to her home and seeks to rehabilitate herself. She reverts to modelling only upon urging from her father, since reconciliation with parents is a key aspect in any redemptive arc in Indian films. Similarly, in 2014's *Mary Kom* (Kumar), the titular character is virtually disowned by her father but then reconciles with him when he learns to accept her boxing career. In the ten years that pass between *Aitraaz* and Chopra's star turn in *Mary Kom*, female ambition is constructed and treated differently. *Aitraaz*'s Sonia puts career and her own desires before the traditional dream of marriage and family, and she does so with apparently no regret and no concern for the possibility that she might be threatening the family of another. In *Fashion*, Meghna is ambitious but she pays the price when she steps outside the boundaries of what is considered appropriate for a good Indian girl, including drunken sex with a Black man in an industry and arguably a culture that has been criticized for its anti-Black racism (Ghosh, 2017). In *Mary Kom*, the female character is as ambitious a boxer as Meghna is a model, and as in the other narratives, there is criticism and opposition for a young woman who puts career before marriage.

However, inasmuch as Mary is able to balance the demands of a singularly successful career with those of marriage and parenthood, the movie suggests that she does so because of the unqualified support of her husband. If the portrayal in *Mary Kom*—based on the boxer's life story—is to be believed, her spouse is encouraging, untroubled by slights regarding his masculinity, and willing to take more responsibility at home so that she can train. In some ways, the mere decision to highlight this ongoing challenge, and the way the couple handles it together, may be one of the most radical portrayals of female achievement in popular Indian cinema. In

Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna (Johar, 2006), Preity Zinta's Rhea suffers for her ambition, as her husband's own professional fortunes have fallen while hers are on the rise, and it becomes clear that he resents the time she invests in her career. In *Mary Kom*, both partners are promising athletes, but Mary's husband, seeing that she cannot live without boxing, prioritizes her career over his.

Even this portrayal is somewhat one-dimensional, but it is nonetheless a more empathetic depiction than the one in *Aitraaz*, *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* or in *Sultan* (Zafar, 2016), starring Salman Khan and Anushka Sharma. In *Sultan*, as in *Mary Kom*, a barrier-breaking female athlete is depicted, but *Sultan* is really a movie for the devoted Salman Khan fan, even though Anushka Sharma's Aarfa is the impetus behind Sultan's wrestling career. As with Mary, we see Aarfa's heartbreak when she has to stop her career in her prime due to pregnancy. Unlike Mary, Aarfa stops competing and does not resume, and her first child passes away, due in part—the movie implies—to Sultan's absence as he pursues his own professional success above all. Critics suggest that she should have refused the film because it calls her feminist credentials into question, citing Salman Khan's misogynist Sultan and the fact that he manages to become a star wrestler in just a few months, while Aarfa has been wrestling most of her life (Menon, 2016; Parikh, 2016). In particular, both critics are astounded that Aarfa gives up her career meekly, with no discussion between husband and wife, when she discovers that she is pregnant—at the same time that she secures a spot in the Olympics (Menon, 2016; Parikh, 2016). Indeed, the emphasis on pregnancy, and the way in which it changes a woman's life, is handled differently in the films under discussion here, but certainly the notion of embodiment and how it can empower or disempower, is a running theme.

Embodying the Feminine

In *Kahaani* (Ghosh, 2012), pregnancy is also a significant point of focus. Vidya Balan wins over the viewer when she deploys her seemingly pregnant body in her quest to seek vengeance for her late husband. She uses it to display vulnerability and denote her fierce commitment to her husband, and we later discover that this performative act is not false as much as it is repurposed, since Vidya lost her own baby in the aftermath of her husband's murder. It is also a savvy decision on a number of levels: the very pregnant Vidya is essentially invisible as she does not embody a highly sexualized persona—certainly not as much as she would in a more conventional Indian drama or even in another Balan film, *The Dirty Picture* (Luthria, 2011)—and poses an uncomfortable inconvenience to those around her. The success of her mission rests upon the fact that many of the characters are ready to ignore or even murder a pregnant woman, despite the romanticization of Indian motherhood in the genre.

This romanticization is called into question throughout the film. In a prologue sequence, a man seeks to halt a terrorist attack, looking for a package that will endanger passengers on a packed commuter train. He does not pay sufficient attention to a young mother attempting to soothe her crying baby, but it is this young woman who leaves behind the package—a bottle of baby milk—whose contents kill everyone on the train, including the man who sought to stop the attack: Vidya's husband. Posing as a heavily pregnant woman, Vidya uses this performance of gender and motherhood to mask her mission: to find and kill the assassin responsible for her husband's death, and to bring others behind it to justice. Her seeming vulnerability causes a police officer, nicknamed Rana, to befriend her and develop a protective attitude towards her.

Yet, *Kahaani* troubles this scenario by presenting Vidya as a character who functions on multiple levels. While she manipulates and uses the trope of the damsel in distress to her advantage, she is no victim. However, Vidya does carry elements of the dutiful Indian woman. Her scheme is driven by the desire to avenge her husband and she plans carefully, understanding the messages that she is inscribing onto her body. Unlike female protagonists in other popular films, she is not a sexual object. For a lead female character to carry a film is exceptional enough in Bollywood. To do it without sexualizing herself is even more notable, for as Ghaznavi, Grasso, and Taylor (2017) discuss, central female characters in Bollywood films are often highly objectified as they fulfil their standard role of love interest for the real lead, the male actor (see pp. 39-41). Indeed, Balan's portrayal (in *The Dirty Picture*) of the late actress Silk Smitha, known in part for the many erotic roles she played, calls attention to Smitha's ability to break barriers and to exercise some agency in terms of how she deployed sexuality, but any feminist messaging may be subverted by the viewer's knowledge that Smitha ultimately meets a tragic end, through suicide.

Similarly, Priyanka Chopra has played a number of romantic and sexualized roles, and is clearly conscious of the way in which her body performs gender and race. She recounts the racism that she experienced as a young student in the United States as well as the rejection from producers who refused to cast a woman of colour, or who advised her that she was replaceable in comparison to a male star (Yuan, 2017). In response, Chopra has worked hard to create a unique persona. As a *New York Times* article by Anupama Chopra noted back in 2005, several Bollywood actors have been willing to blur the lines around femininity, morality and chastity—because of course, these are inextricably linked in Bollywood films—in order to stand out from the crowd, but arguably, Chopra has been the most successful. This success could be due to several factors, including her willingness, after initial hesitation, to return to roles that emphasize her physicality.

In *Quantico* (2015-2018), Chopra's Alex Parrish captures the viewer's attention early on, not only for her beauty and air of mystery, but for the sexual confidence with which the character is imbued. If, as Dorothy Smith (1988) and others have argued, women tend to take up as little space as possible, Parrish determinedly breaks out of that box. Moreover, it is evident that Chopra has left behind any remaining preoccupation with appearing chaste—early in the pilot, Alex engages in casual sex with a stranger in a car. Alex's body continues to play a starring role throughout the show's three-season run, and as in *Mary Kom*, this is often a sign of strength. While we frequently see Alex in romantic and sexual situations, we also see her exercising and fighting, albeit in high heels and perfect coiffures, and viewers acquire a better sense of her character than they typically would in the space of a Bollywood film.

In *Mary Kom*, Chopra is once again a strong, unconventional woman, but here her body has a very different significance, not least because she bears almost no resemblance to the real-life Mary Kom, who is from the northeastern Indian state of Manipur. The choice of Chopra to play Mary seems like a stark departure, compared by Nehmat Kaur (2014) to white actors donning blackface. Despite the best efforts of a make-up artist to make Chopra's eyes appear smaller, to lighten her eyebrows with bleach, and to add both freckles and “the famous ‘apple cheeks’ of the hills,” Chopra's distinctive appearance remains (Ganesan, 2014), as do the implications of failing to cast an actress from the northeast of India. While this casting choice seems to remove real-life agency from some northeastern Indian women, including actors who may have limited access to such roles, the film constructs Chopra's version of Mary Kom as a symbol of strength and defiance. There are attempts to desexualize her body, with baggy and shapeless clothing in early scenes, and a shaved head at one point. However, as Mary becomes more successful, she is also increasingly

feminine, with more make-up, jewellery and accessories. Anushka Sharma's Aarfa follows the same trajectory, though she appears most traditionally feminine, moving from tracksuits to salwar kameez, once she has become pregnant and ended her competitive wrestling career.

If Chopra and Sharma find themselves boxed back into feminine apparel even in films where they appear as athletes, Vidya Balan's body attracts a different kind of attention from critics. While her ability to inhabit a seemingly pregnant body is a main plot point in *Kahaani*, focus on her body is not isolated to a single film. In contrast to the perpetually slim Chopra and Sharma, Balan has been criticized constantly for her weight (*Hindustan Times*, 2019). One reporter went so far as to ask if she had considered losing weight so that she could star in "glamorous roles," rather than "women-centric films," to which Balan retorted that the reporter might wish to change his perception instead (*India Today*, 2017). The exchange further demonstrates the pressures on these women and the social belief that a woman's film is an inferior one.

Shades of Grey: What Does Empowerment Look Like?

Indeed, roles like Balan's and Sharma's in sleeper hits such as *Kahaani* and *NH10* (Singh, 2015), respectively, have helped to initiate conversation around whether or not Bollywood has moved forward in terms of its treatment of women and social issues more broadly. While both films have an outlandish element to them, they lack the song-and-dance numbers with the windswept hair that Chopra references and they are also essentially carried by the female leads. Those leads, too, are complex characters compared to the most popular heroines of yesteryear. Indeed, if Chopra talks about the way she has moved between vamp and good girl, *Kahaani*'s Vidya and *NH10*'s Meera incorporate both sides, with plenty of grey in between. Both women are brave; both demonstrate unexpected strength of character; both turn the tables on their male persecutors; both are murderers. Some of Meera's violent acts are driven by fear for her life, of course, but by the end of the movie, she is in possession of a car and is ahead of her tormentors—she could drive away to safety. Instead, surrounded by a seemingly endless sea of corruption, misogyny, and loss, she chooses to kill.

The movie's most haunting message is that these killings will not change anything. The village she has stumbled upon may be an especially terrible, patriarchal place, evoking stereotypes of primitiveness among poor, rural populations—but in her everyday professional life in the city, she also encounters sexism and violence. The director notes that one of the film's underlying themes is gender, and explains that he incorporated a female villain in the person of the village chief in order to show how pervasive and unending violence against women is: "It says things about the role of women in the upholding and dissemination of patriarchy...They also have to negotiate the system and participate in it even if it means the oppression of other women" (*The Telegraph*, 2015).

Sharma herself, a co-producer who waived her acting fee, appeared surprised by the critical and commercial success of *NH10*, which was a much smaller film than the conventional Yash Raj blockbusters that helped establish Sharma as a star. Vidya Balan's path to stardom was less smooth as she appeared in a wide variety of films, ranging from small to blockbuster, before appearing in *Kahaani*. Like Meera, Vidya (the character shares a first name with her portrayer) is a young professional woman who appears to be happily married and willing to do anything to save her husband. While she conveys more warmth than Meera, she is far more calculating. As the events

of the film unfold, it becomes clear that she has outwitted everyone who crossed her path, outwitting the police and an assassin. Having completed her mission near the end of the film, she disappears into a crowd of women celebrating the festival of Durga Puja. While the festival of Durga Puja, referenced more than once in the film, evokes the notion of a warrior goddess, most of Vidya's opponents believe that she will be easily subdued. The avenging angel benefits from the stereotypes associated with the angel in the house—best known as a Victorian notion but one that permeates many Indian texts and beliefs, even in contemporary society.

The use of Durga Puja commemorations, honouring the Mother Goddess, telegraphs a central feminist emphasis in the film. Ultimately, Vidya proves to be a canny and resolute warrior as she seeks vengeance for her husband and child, but this shatters another myth. While the longsuffering mother in many Indian films is honest and pure in intention, what does the viewer make of the fact that Vidya sacrifices others to get her way? She manipulates the kind-hearted and honest police officer Rana, placing his career and life at risk. These moral complexities do not seem to have negatively affected viewers' reception of the character: the low-budget film went on to exceed all box-office expectations.

All three women have, in fact, achieved enough success that they are now able to exercise more agency in their choice of roles and the productions they will support. All three have ventured into production, with Balan using her first producer credit to work on a short film about gender equality, *Natkhat* (Vyas, 2020). Sharma's own debut as producer was on *NH10*, whose searing commentary about gender in Indian society inadvertently highlighted the difficulties of being a strong woman in Bollywood. Sharma, whose previous projects were more typical Bollywood romances, was asked repeatedly if she had turned to producing too early (Sharma, n.d.) or was too young (Sahani, 2015). The desire to produce is not surprising: all three actors are interested in advocating for women's empowerment and recognize the need to control the media narrative. Chopra is an ambassador for Girl Rising, a global campaign for girls' education (<http://girlrising.in/about-us/#what-is-girl-rising>), while Balan has won an award from the Calcutta Chamber of Commerce for her efforts to empower women and Sharma has spoken candidly about the limitations for women, even the most successful ones, in Bollywood (in Parikh, 2016).

If popular Indian cinema has entered an era where films are now more socially aware and patriarchy is acknowledged as an issue, these young women deserve considerable credit. At the same time, in negotiating the traps of an industry that is notorious for nepotism, sexism, Hindu-inflected nationalism and other forms of discrimination, these women also remain limited at best, and enablers of oppression at worst. In some sense, they represent a type of liberal feminism, fighting for equal rights without fully acknowledging the intersectional nature of inequity, especially in a place that is as diverse as India, but the liberal feminism tag does not suffice to explain the distinct overlapping and possibly endless challenges that a feminist actor must face in Bollywood. For a feminist character to be accepted, she must have soft edges, usually supplied through her alignment with the mother/beauty/nation nexus. All three actors seem to accept the systemic nature of this reality and to endorse it. They linger in a kind of elliptical space, promoting a feminism that is pragmatic and sometimes self-serving, but arguably a departure for a space as restrictive as Bollywood.

Love of God and Country: Acceptance and Aggression

If there is an actor at the same stature as me, who would be able to bring in only that much money to a movie, he would still be paid more than me because he is a guy. Nobody is even thinking about it. It is just ingrained.

Anushka Sharma (in Parikh, 2016)

While Chopra, Balan and Sharma appear to have blazed a trail for empowering roles for women, progress continues to come slowly and incompletely. In some ways, the change that is made possible onscreen may be enabled in part by their portrayals' relative caution in their own feminist critiques. As Sharma notes above, pay equity continues to be an issue in Bollywood, with women consistently earning less than their male counterparts, and ageism persisting for women but not for men, as evidenced by the 23-year age difference between Sharma and co-stars Salman Khan and Shah Rukh Khan.

Similarly, while *Mission Mangal* (Shakti, 2019) has been hailed for its showcasing of women scientists, including one played by Balan, the film's promotion attracted criticism because Akshay Kumar was front and centre on posters with the five female stars receiving less prominence. Balan sidestepped these criticisms when asked: "There is no denying that the biggest star on this film and one of the biggest stars in the country is Akshay Kumar. When you talk of the business of a film, you talk in terms of the male actor. Hopefully, in a few years, that'll change." There is no mention of the fact that her own starring turns in *Kahaani* and *The Dirty Picture* were immensely successful and did not depend at all on the male actors in those films. She went on to describe her character as someone who is a feminist but not an "aggressive" feminist (*India Today*, 2019). This affirms these actors' conscious decision to promote female empowerment in a way that reduces the sense of threat to the audience. Some of the strongest characters portrayed by these actors are also ones that conform carefully to the demands of devotion, Bollywood-style: they are devoted to religion, country and husband/family.

For instance, while Mary Kom is Christian, a departure from the paradigmatic Hindu Bollywood heroine (Hirji, 2010: 19-20, 27-28, 116-122; Mishra, 2002), she follows the demands-of-devotion paradigm, aided by the casting of the Hindu Chopra in this role. In addition to her piety, she is devoted to her parents, siblings, husband, child, and of course, her nation. Walking the line in this way in her films may explain how Chopra remains a darling of both diaspora and her home country, despite explicitly sexual roles. Offscreen, too, Chopra has demonstrated willingness to use her stardom in service of the "Hindu majoritarian 'new India'" whose rise has been documented by Chakraborty (2019). When *Quantico* aired an episode that was seen as anti-Indian, Chopra was blamed personally by many Indians, highlighting the enormous pressure on an actor who is seen "as a quasi-ambassador for India in the West" (Doshi, 2018). Indeed, many members of the diaspora are likely cheered by Chopra's status and ability to communicate that "We don't talk like Apu from 'The Simpsons,' and there's more to the world's biggest democracy than henna and sparkly clothes" (in Doshi, 2018). But with that power comes scrutiny: Chopra's 2018 visit to a Rohingya refugee camp was criticized for highlighting suffering Muslims, while her bare legs made more headlines than the content of the discussion when she met with Prime Minister Modi in 2017 (Doshi, 2018).

Small wonder, perhaps, that Chopra touts her love of India and ensures that patriotism remains front and centre in her work. *Mary Kom* ends with a prolonged focus on the Indian flag and the Indian anthem as Mary weeps in gratitude for her athletic victory as well as the recovery of her young son—a none-too-subtle nod to the ways in which motherhood and nation are inextricably joined, while gliding over the racism and marginalization experienced by Indians from the northeast. In February 2019, Chopra also “tweeted ‘Jai Hind’, a slogan loosely translated as Hail India, with the hashtag #IndianArmy alluding to Indian fighter jets bombing militant training camp in Pakistan,” attracting public criticism from social media influencer Ayesha Malik (in Radhakrishnan, 2019). Malik’s challenge to Chopra at a public event was cut off when her microphone was taken away and Chopra responded that she herself is not pro-war but is pro-India, adding, “Girl, don’t yell. We’re all here for love. Don’t yell. Don’t embarrass yourself” (in BBC News; also see Radhakrishnan, 2019). For a purported feminist to advise another woman to quiet herself is jarring.

Chopra offers perhaps the most complex case of someone who claims to fight racism and sexism while supporting nationalist imaginaries that oppress others. Her resistance to the racism she experiences in the United States makes her a role model for other young South Asians living in diaspora, particularly women, yet the easy dismissal she enacts against another educated, patriotic, outspoken feminist calls into question the very premise of *Girl Rising*—unless that premise is that only Hindu Indian girls deserve education and a platform to speak. Such contradictions may also be seen in the same films cited here as possible exemplars of progressive gender portrayals. While there is indeed an attempt at portraying strong women, these films have significant limitations. In addition to those discussed already, there are also issues in terms of the extent of the patriarchy depicted here, some of which is seen as restricted in terms of geography and class. Moreover, patriarchy is ultimately not just a male problem but a female problem, helping to displace some responsibility.

While *Kahaani* and *NH10* both depict corners of India that are dangerous places for women, they are just corners. Vidya navigates a Calcutta that is both dangerous and compelling, while *NH10* shows sexism in the city but this becomes deeper and more deadly in the rural area that Meera and her husband drive into. India overall is not necessarily at fault—our heroines have both ventured into dangerous territory. In the case of *NH10*, Khan (2015) acknowledges the film’s emphasis on patriarchy but notes dryly that “the sheer monotony of almost every poor person being evil really bogs down the narrative,” while Namrata Joshi (2015) opines that the “film loses out on complexity by opting for a way too easy narrative: the rural brutes vs us, the city slickers.” A sense of place, then, is linked to experiences of patriarchy in both *NH10* and *Kahaani*, but neither film really raises the possibility that Indian society needs to be examined as a whole for sexist treatment of women.

If this theme comes through at all, it is in *NH10*’s depiction of the village *sarpanch* or chief in the movie, an older woman to whom Meera appeals for help. It transpires that the *sarpanch* herself is more concerned with family honour and caste rules than maternal affection or womanly empathy. This is the dark reflection of the seemingly timeless narrative in which every good mother is so strongly identified with India that she will make any sacrifice to uphold its values. While this could be seen as a brave artistic choice, addressing the sexism that is undoubtedly upheld by women in India and in diaspora, it can also be seen as turning the sexist critique back on itself—if women themselves are complicit, how can we blame men for patriarchy?

Thus, the films examined here might be seen as opposing patriarchal representations in a way that allows Bollywood to co-opt a diluted version of feminism, a classic example of hegemony at work. Similarly, while Sharma and Balan may not go as far as Chopra in their endorsement of the Indian state, neither challenges it significantly. Balan makes references offscreen to inequity but notes also that she is happy with her career. Sharma is more sharply critical of gender inequity in Bollywood but like Chopra, expresses pride in her family's military background, saying that the "army has a huge role to play for shaping me as a person and contributing to my life reaching here" (Gupta, 2012). Her 2017 marriage to cricketer Virat Kohli has no doubt solidified an image of a successful young woman who supports India's supremacy on a number of levels.

And yet, in seeking out roles that have feminist qualities, at least some of the time, these actors are sending a clear signal that participating in Bollywood need not be the same as accepting their own denigration. If representation matters, then surely it should matter in one of the biggest film industries in the world, whose audiences can be found throughout the diaspora. The influence that these women have had through some of their projects is reflected in the variety of venues where they are discussed—in Indian news outlets, to be sure, but also in blogs, newspapers, and Twitter feeds based outside of India. Mallika Rao's (2018) suggestion that she and her Indian-born friends in diaspora are deeply invested in conversations about Chopra's actions reveal the extent to which a successful Indian actor can prompt debate about identity, gender and ambition for women everywhere.

Demanding and Doing Better: Girls Are Rising

Ultimately, then, what might one conclude about the challenges and realities of promoting a feminist agenda in popular Indian cinema? I believe that these actors do help to challenge gender stereotypes. At the very least, they problematize them. The shades of grey these women embody marks progress in and of itself. Their films are imperfect, to be sure, but they do challenge existing tropes. In some of the films examined here as well as the show *Quantico*, the female lead is no perfect Indian goddess, but could be seen as a smart, strong, three-dimensional woman. For their portrayals to venture into such territory, and to take on production roles that will allow them to guide an international conversation around gender equity, represents progress. At the same time, the scrutiny of Bollywood actors, and the attention to their bodies, their clothes, their relationships and their loyalty to an India imagined through the lens of Hindu nationalism, place significant restrictions upon them. When a female celebrity functions within such a suffocating environment, should one be more sympathetic to the ways in which they ensure careful conformity to an oppressive state? The dangers seem very real for the Indian actor who does not pledge fealty to an explicitly Hindu-dominated Mother India. Could Anushka Sharma speak out regarding pay equity and sexism if she was not Hindu, high-caste, with patriotic credentials burnished by a military father and a star athlete spouse? In the reviews and interviews centred around these women and these films, it becomes clear that the male gaze—and the gaze of the nation—has not been subverted, and these women are well aware of it. And yet, blaming the media and society more broadly seems to rob these successful women of their agency—Priyanka Chopra has international fame and presumably considerable wealth and opportunities, meaning that she need not encourage BJP-style Indian nationalism, and yet she has done so.

As a scholar of South Asian descent writing in diaspora, I question whether these actors represent feminist change, and if truly meaningful change will ever be possible in the Bollywood context. It is too easy to pass judgement from a distance on the choices that others have made to promote change within restrictive environments, though it is also worth noting that many strong feminist movements have flourished in India and other parts of South Asia (Jayawardena, 2016; Narayan, 1997), demonstrating what is possible. The feminism of these actors, however limited, is raising awareness, offering depictions complicated enough to warrant further scrutiny, and causing women everywhere to demand more of their role models, and of the society they inhabit. This in itself makes these women worth watching. However, given the troubling nationalist and gendered politics of Bollywood and Indian society, it remains deeply concerning that even these ostensibly feminist actors are promoting a version of the Indian feminine that validates hegemonic notions around who belongs to the nation.

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