

**(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 manner in which this work challenges gender stereotypes. It also examines the ways 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, so that middle-class, Hindu nationalist narratives remain dominant. The actors themselves must drive the change, utilizing a performance of femininity, nationalism and self-sacrifice that fits 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 sign of the ways in which Bollywood both pushes forward transnational conversations about social conventions, and remains stubbornly mired in the past.

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