

Projecting Patriarchy: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Gendered Narratives in Bollywood Films (1970–2024) through a Criminological Lens

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Abstract

Cinema in India holds significant cultural influence, shaping public perceptions of crime, justice, and morality. This study critically examines 56 popular Bollywood films released between 1970 and 2024 to analyze the evolution of gendered crime narratives through a criminological lens. Using reflexive thematic analysis of more than 560 dialogues, the research identifies eleven core themes—including Gender Roles and Patriarchy, Sacrifice and Self-Effacement, Female Silencing, and Moral Judgment and Social Stigma—demonstrating how portrayals of women have shifted across decades.

A reflexive thematic analysis of these films reveals clear temporal shifts: while films from the 1970s–1990s predominantly reinforced patriarchal norms, nearly half of post-2010 films (approximately 42%) depict greater female agency, resistance, and moral complexity. Despite this emerging trend, progress remains inconsistent, as mainstream cinema still frequently centers women’s identities around submission, emotional dependence, and domestic roles. The analysis also highlights how cinematic depictions of crime and masculinity contribute to public understandings of justice and gendered violence.

Overall, the findings demonstrate cinema’s dual function: reproducing long-standing social hierarchies while simultaneously creating space for counter-narratives that challenge gendered expectations. The study underscores the significance of ethically conscious storytelling in reshaping public discourse and advocates for more equitable, responsible portrayals of women in popular media.

Keywords: gendered narratives, patriarchy, Bollywood, thematic analysis, criminological lens

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Introduction

A common sight in urban India is commuters immersed in the screens of their devices, consuming film and media. This underscores a fundamental reality: media content is a trusted source of information and values. That moment captured a quiet truth: we trust the content we consume. In India, cinema isn't just entertainment; it is cultural currency. Unlike fleeting online content, films demand attention and leave a lasting impact. In a country as diverse as India, cinema not only reflects social realities but actively shapes them—constructing narratives around gender, crime, justice, and morality. Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, has long served as a powerful vehicle for storytelling. Its influence extends beyond aesthetics and entertainment into the formation of public attitudes and perceptions.

Scholarship on Indian cinema consistently affirms its role as a social mirror and catalyst. Research has explored its impact on social attitudes (Bhatia & Geetanjali, 2020) and cultural transformation (Lakhendra, 2022). However, a consistent focus on cinema's general social impact has left a gap for a focused, longitudinal analysis of gendered crime narratives through a specifically criminological lens. The representation of crime in Indian films, whether as a cautionary tale or an oversimplified spectacle, carries significant implications for how various segments of society perceive justice, morality, and social reform. While mainstream blockbusters dominate public discourse, socially conscious films often remain underrated despite their potential to bring critical issues to the forefront. Films such as *Fandry* (2013) exemplify cinema's capacity to address systemic injustices, promote empathy, and ignite dialogue about pressing social problems. However, the dual-edged nature of cinematic storytelling also warrants scrutiny, particularly in the context of its potential to reinforce harmful stereotypes and desensitize audiences to real-world issues.

Crimes against women in India remain a serious concern, with the NCRB (2022) reporting over 4.45 lakh cases in a single year. These numbers reflect deeper patterns of patriarchal violence, caste-based injustice, and institutional apathy. Globally, gender-based violence remains one of the most underreported crimes (UNODC, 2019). In such a context, understanding how cinema represents and perhaps distorts these realities becomes critical. Despite cinema's potential for social critique, mainstream Indian films often reinforce dominant narratives that portray women as submissive, crime as sensational, and justice as theatrical. This raises urgent

questions about whether cinema merely reflects society—or helps shape it. This study emerges from that tension.

While previous studies have examined media influence, few have conducted a systematic analysis of how Indian crime cinema constructs gender across historical periods. The evolution of these narratives—from the 1970s to the present—has not been adequately studied through a lens that integrates feminist criminology, which foregrounds power, patriarchy, and gendered inequality, and cultural criminology, which examines how media constructs meaning around crime, deviance, and justice. Together, these lenses offer a more comprehensive understanding of how cinematic portrayals shape public interpretations of gender roles, victimization, and criminality. Moreover, the nuanced contributions of regional cinema remain underexplored within mainstream academic discourse.

Thematic Assumption

This study assumes that Indian cinema both reflects and shapes societal values. While films have gradually shifted from reinforcing patriarchal and casteist norms to more progressive narratives, the pace of change is uneven across genres and regions. These cinematic portrayals influence how audiences—especially youth—perceive crime, justice, and gender roles.

However, the line between storytelling and stereotyping is often blurred. As Dowler, Fleming, and Muzzatti (2006) note, media tends to sensationalize crime—something evident in Indian cinema’s recurring portrayal of Dalit characters as either helpless or villainous. Films like *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) offer more nuanced representations, but they remain rare.

Ferguson (2010) argues that repeated exposure to media violence can desensitize viewers, even if it doesn’t directly lead to crime. In India, where cinema often merges fact and fiction, this desensitization is compounded. Real-life crime-based films like *Talvar* (2015) and *No One Killed Jessica* (2011) raise awareness, but their dramatization risks overshadowing the real issues. As Pfeiffer, Windzio, and Kleimann (2005) suggest, such portrayals may heighten public fear and support for punitive measures, rather than prompting structural reform.

This study analyzes 56 significant Indian films from the 1970s to the 2020s, spanning both mainstream Hindi cinema and critically acclaimed regional films. It examines how portrayals of women in crime narratives have shifted—from victims and silent sufferers to agents of resistance and reform. The focus includes depictions of justice (retributive, legal, or reformist) and the rise of morally complex characters like anti-heroes, reflecting changing ideas around power, gender, and rebellion. By exploring these narratives and their societal reception, the study aims to understand cinema's role in shaping public attitudes toward crime, justice, and morality.

In conclusion, Indian cinema holds immense influence in shaping cultural conscience. While it can inspire awareness and challenge norms, it also risks reinforcing stereotypes. Its true potential lies in promoting socially responsible storytelling—a collective responsibility shared by creators, audiences, and policymakers alike.

Conceptual Frameworks

This study draws on feminist criminology, cultural criminology, and media theory to analyze how Indian cinema constructs and communicates crime narratives through the lens of gender, power, and social responsibility.

Patriarchy is understood here as a systemic social structure in which men dominate positions of moral authority, leadership, and privilege (Walby, 1990). In Indian cinema, this manifests through recurring portrayals of women as submissive wives, silent victims, or accessories to male protagonists. Crime films often reinforce patriarchal ideology by depicting women through the male gaze—diminishing their agency and normalizing their victimization. These repetitive tropes influence public perceptions of justice, morality, and gender roles, particularly among younger audiences (Hafeez, 2021).

In contrast, progressivism in cinema reflects a growing trend toward inclusive, socially aware storytelling that challenges traditional hierarchies. Recent Indian films increasingly portray women as complex, autonomous individuals central to the narrative rather than passive plot devices. Progressivism also reshapes crime storytelling by rejecting glamorized violence and focusing instead on structural causes of crime such as caste oppression, economic inequality, and institutional

failure. Films like *Mulk* (2018) exemplify this shift by questioning dominant narratives and advocating for justice and equality.

Crime narratives in Indian cinema serve as cultural texts that mirror and shape societal attitudes toward legality, deviance, and justice. Traditionally, these narratives followed clear moral binaries—heroes representing law and villains symbolizing chaos. Over time, however, cinematic portrayals have evolved to include morally complex characters and ambiguous depictions of justice. Some films romanticize crime through charismatic anti-heroes, while others use crime as a means of social critique. These portrayals significantly affect how audiences view law enforcement, legal systems, and crime itself. Rizvi (2021) notes a measurable correlation between exposure to cinematic depictions of crime and audience attitudes toward real-life criminal behavior.

Finally, the concept of socially conscious cinema anchors this framework by emphasizing the role of films in raising awareness, challenging stereotypes, and initiating public discourse. Unlike commercial blockbusters that prioritize entertainment, socially conscious films seek to expose structural injustice and generate critical conversations around caste, gender, and systemic inequality. Works like *Thappad* (2020), *Masaan* (2015), and *Article 15* (2019) do not just reflect reality—they actively interrogate it.

Together, these conceptual lenses allow for a layered analysis of how Indian cinema not only mirrors but also constructs societal understandings of gender, crime, and justice. The framework informs both the selection of films and the interpretation of themes, dialogues, and narrative patterns across decades.

Review of the Literature

Foundational scholars such as Laura Mulvey (1975) argue that mainstream cinema constructs women through the “male gaze,” reducing them to visual objects within patriarchal narrative systems. This perspective is central to criminological interpretations of gendered victimization, as it highlights how cinematic form itself reproduces power inequalities. Expanding beyond gender, Bordwell’s (1985) work on narrative construction demonstrates how film organizes meaning through selective framing, dramatization, and emotional alignment with characters—techniques that significantly influence audience perceptions of legality, morality,

and responsibility. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) further underscores how repeated depictions of femininity and masculinity in film solidify social expectations, shaping how viewers interpret gendered behavior within crime narratives.

Building on these foundations, contemporary media-crime scholars examine how cinematic representations affect public attitudes. Welsh (2011) shows that crime films simultaneously distort and inform understandings of justice, reinforcing simplified binaries of good and evil while shaping beliefs about crime prevention. Rafter (2006) similarly argues that cinema often reduces complex structural issues—such as inequality or institutional failure—to individual moral choices, thereby influencing how audiences conceptualize offenders and victims. Pfeiffer et al. (2005) demonstrate that such portrayals have measurable consequences: high exposure to sensationalized crime media correlates with inflated fear of crime and support for punitive justice measures.

Within South Asian contexts, researchers have highlighted how Bollywood, in particular, dramatizes violence and glamorizes deviant characters. Hafeez (2021) shows that Bollywood's stylized portrayal of violent criminals contributes to desensitization among youth and shifts cultural attitudes toward deviance. Azeema (2024) extends this argument to global streaming platforms, observing how charismatic anti-heroes in series like *Money Heist* foster admiration for criminality. While these studies underscore cinema's influential role, they remain limited in their treatment of gendered crime narratives. Many focus on violence or deviance broadly but do not examine how female characters are constructed across historical periods, nor do they fully analyze how patriarchal norms shape cinematic storytelling.

Collectively, this literature establishes three key insights: (1) cinema wields considerable power in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice; (2) crime representations often reinforce stereotypes and reduce structural issues to individual pathology; and (3) Bollywood and related media significantly influence youth culture and crime attitudes. However, despite this growing body of work, there remains limited research that traces the historical evolution of gendered crime narratives in Indian cinema or interprets these shifts through integrated frameworks of feminist criminology and cultural criminology. This gap necessitates a more

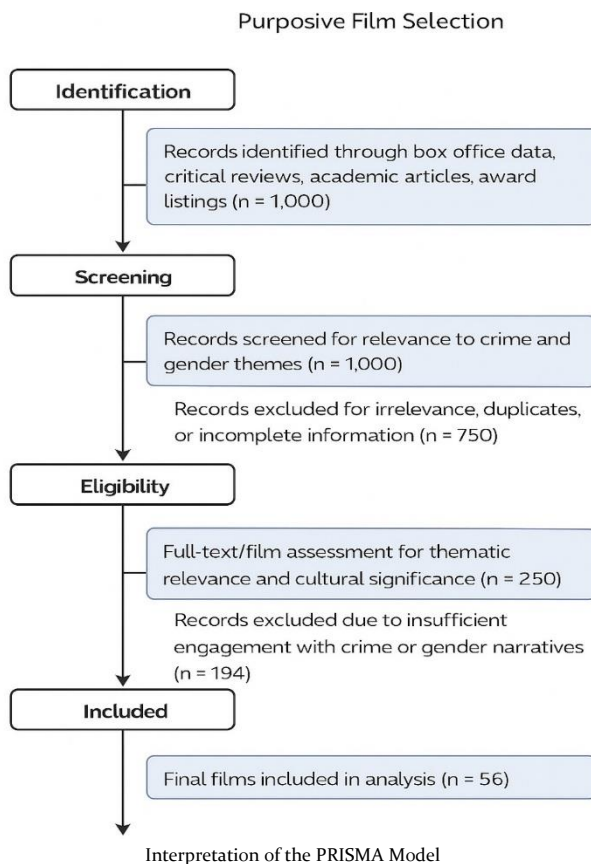
layered analysis of how film constructs gendered meaning around crime, power, and justice across decades.

Methodology

❖ Research Design

This study employs Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as its primary method. The unit of analysis includes both textual elements (dialogues) and narrative arcs (storylines, character development, and plot structures), allowing for a systematic examination of gendered representations in crime cinema. While textual and narrative analysis overlap, the thematic framework structures interpretation by identifying recurring patterns, shifts, and contradictions across films.

Although PRISMA guidelines are traditionally applied to systematic reviews of empirical research, the principle of transparent, replicable selection inspired the design of this study's film curation. Rather than a strict PRISMA process, a purposive, criterion-based selection was employed to ensure both rigor and relevance. The selection criteria—commercial success, critical acclaim, and thematic engagement with gender and crime—parallel PRISMA's emphasis on clear inclusion/exclusion rules, allowing the process to be transparent, justifiable, and replicable for future research. Detailed documentation of sources, screening steps, and final film selection is provided in the appendix to maintain replicability and methodological integrity.



A purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy was used to select films, ensuring cultural and commercial relevance while focusing explicitly on gender and crime narratives. The initial pool included approximately 1,000 films spanning five decades (1970s–2020s). Titles were narrowed to 56 based on the following measurable criteria:

- **Commercial Success:** Films grossing over 50 crore INR (or equivalent box office success in historical context), or appearing in top domestic box office rankings for their release year.
- **Critical Acclaim:** Films recognized through major awards, festival screenings, or notable scholarly/media discussions of gender and crime themes.

- **Thematic Relevance:** Films with explicit engagement in crime narratives and gender representation, identified through preliminary content scans, synopses, and reviews.

Data collection involved coding 560 dialogues across the selected films. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step process:

- **Familiarization:** Repeated viewing of films and transcription of key dialogues and scenes.
- **Generating Initial Codes:** Open coding for gendered, relational, and criminological concepts.
- **Searching for Themes:** Collating codes into thematic clusters such as Female Silencing, Romantic Idealism, and Female Assertion of Autonomy.
- **Reviewing Themes:** Refining themes for coherence, consistency, and relevance to both narrative and textual elements.
- **Defining and Naming Themes:** Assigning clear definitions to each theme, linking them to broader social, cultural, and criminological constructs.
- **Producing the Report:** Writing the analysis, integrating textual, visual, and auditory cues to trace the evolution of gendered crime narratives.

This approach allows for a rigorous, transparent, and replicable analysis of how mainstream Hindi cinema constructs and negotiates gendered crime narratives over five decades. By combining purposive sampling with thematic analysis of dialogues and narrative arcs, the study highlights both continuity and change in the representation of women, crime, and justice within Indian popular cinema.

❖ **Inclusion Criteria**

- Films categorized as crime, noir, or social drama with crime as a central theme
- Released between 1970 and 2024
- Explicit portrayal of gender roles in crime narratives
- Recognized for their cultural, social, or critical impact

❖ **Exclusion Criteria**

- Marginal portrayal of crime/gender themes
- Remakes or direct adaptations lacking Indian socio-cultural context
- Short films or web series

Data collection involved coding 560 dialogues from 56 Bollywood films (1970–2024), analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic approach. 1) Familiarization: Films were viewed multiple times, and dialogues and key scenes transcribed. 2) Generating Initial Codes: Dialogues were coded for gendered representations, narrative tropes, and criminological concepts. 3) Searching for Themes: Codes were grouped into potential themes, such as romantic idealism, female silencing, moral judgment, and resistance. 4) Reviewing Themes: Themes were refined by checking against the data for consistency and relevance. 5) Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined (e.g., Female Assertion of Autonomy, Love as Entrapment) and linked to broader social and criminological constructs. 6) Producing the Report: The analysis integrated textual, visual, and auditory cues to interpret how gender roles evolved, highlighting shifts from passive, relationally defined characters to autonomous agents or challengers of systemic injustice. Films were also examined for portrayals of caste, class, and institutional inequality, using a dual lens: reinforcement of patriarchal norms versus subversion through socially conscious storytelling. This process ensured a rigorous, data-driven, and analytically grounded understanding of gendered crime narratives in Indian cinema.

Table of Selected Indian Films (1970–2024)

Decade	Films
1970s	Sachaa Jhutha (1970); Anand (1971); Seeta Aur Geeta (1972); Pakeezah (1972); Bobby (1973); Zanjeer (1973); Roti Kapda Aur Makaan (1974); Sholay (1975); Deewar (1975); Kabhi Kabhie (1976); Amar Akbar Anthony (1977); Muqaddar Ka Sikandar (1978); Suhaag (1979)
1980s	Qurbani (1980); Kranti (1981); Naseeb (1981); Vidhaata (1982); Coolie (1983); Ram Teri Ganga Maili (1985); Karma (1986); Hukumat (1987); Tezaab (1988); Maine Pyar Kiya (1989)
1990s	Dil (1990); Saajan (1991); Beta (1992); Aankhen (1993); Hum Aapke Hain Koun..! (1994); Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995); Raja Hindustani (1996); Border (1997); Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998); Satya (1998); Hum Saath-Saath Hain (1999)
2000s	Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai (2000); Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (2001); Devdas (2002); Koi... Mil Gaya (2003); Veer-Zaara (2004); No Entry (2005); Dhoom 2 (2006); Om Shanti Om (2007); Ghajini (2008); 3 Idiots (2009)
2010s	Enthiran (2010); No One Killed Jessica (2011); Ek Tha Tiger (2012); Dhoom 3 (2013); Highway (2014); Talvar (2015); Dangal (2016); Pink (2016); Mom (2017); Sanju (2018); Kabir Singh (2019)
2020s	Thappad (2020); Sherni (2021); Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022); Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway (2023); Laapataa Ladies (2024)

Results

Table 1 – Thematic Table

Sr. No.	Theme	Sub-themes / Codes	Relevant Dialogues
1	Romantic Idealism as Female Purpose	Emotional dependence as identity; complete devotion; self-effacement; motherhood; romantic incompleteness; unconditional love	“Main chahti hoon ki meri zindagi ka har pal aapke saath guzar jaye.” – Bobby (1973); “Tumhare bina main adhuri hoon.” – Kabhi Kabhie (1976)
2	Gender Roles & Patriarchy / Identity	Womanhood defined through marriage; challenging traditional roles; gender expectations	“Pati ke bina aurat adhuri hai.” – Pakeezah (1972); “Aurat ki zindagi uske pati ke saath hi sampurna hoti hai.” – Seeta Aur Geeta (1972); “Aurat ki pehchaan uske pati se hoti hai.” – Vidhaata (1982)
3	Sacrifice & Self-Effacement	Ideal womanhood as tyag and samarpan; sacrifice for family; emotional investment; emotional endurance	“Main apne pati ke liye kuch bhi kar sakti hoon.” – Pakeezah (1972); “Mujhe apne pati ka saath nibhane ka haq hai.” – Seeta Aur Geeta (1972)
4	Female Silencing & Respectability Politics	Respect rooted in silence; obedience; male approval; silencing of ‘deviant’ women	“Aurat ki izzat uski khamoshi mein hai.” – Pakeezah (1972); “Yeh bazaar aurat hai, isey izzat dena...” – Muqaddar Ka Sikandar (1978)
5	Emotional Loneliness & Identity Crisis	Displacement; internal fear; loss of self; longing for recognition; self-doubt	“Mujhe apne aap se darr lagta hai.” – Anand (1971); “Main to kuchh bhi nahin.” – Deewar (1975)
6	Moral Judgment & Social Stigma	Respect denied based on profession or past; patriarchal morality; denial of agency and voice; female as commodity	“Tawaif sirf tamasha hai...” – Muqaddar Ka Sikandar (1978); “Tawaifon ki taqdeer mein shauhar nahi hote.” – Pakeezah (1972)
7	Resistance & Moral Courage	Standing against injustice; challenging social norms	“Samaj ki soch ko badalne ki zaroorat hai.” – Roti Kapda Aur Makaan (1974); “Har insaan joh paap se, zulm se ladta hai wohi bhagwan hota hai.” – Zanjeer (1973)
8	Disillusionment with Social Institutions	Inequality; betrayal; systemic injustice; powerlessness; cultural norms; role of women in society	“Naukri mile toh degree, degree... nahi toh bigdree.” – Roti Kapda Aur Makaan (1974); “Roti, kapda aur makaan par kabza karne waalon ke

			<i>khilaf janta uth khadi hoti hai.</i> " – Roti Kapda Aur Makaan (1974)
9	Female Objectification	Fetishization; male gaze; objectifying gaze; possessiveness; gendered expectations	" <i>Aapke paon dekhe, bahut haseen hai...</i> " – Pakeezah (1972); " <i>Tumhara yeh nachna gaana sabko dikhai deta hai.</i> " – Muqaddar Ka Sikandar (1978)
10	'Love' as Entrapment	Emotional confinement; sacrifice for love; emotional independence; self-respect	" <i>Pyar ki kahani ek aisa pinjra hai jisme mohabbat ke tota kabhi azad nahi hota.</i> " – Roti Kapda Aur Makaan (1974); " <i>Na koi tarang hai, na koi umang hai... meri zindagi bhi kya ek kati patang hai.</i> " – Kabhi Kabhie (1976)
11	Female Assertion of Autonomy	Self-definition; empowerment; self-worth; independent decisions; personal boundaries	"Main apni value jaanti hoon." – 3 Idiots (2009); " <i>I decide who I love, not some programmed algorithm.</i> " – Enthiran (2010)

"The popular Hindi cinema is one of the principal forms in which modern India thinks about itself." — Ashis Nandy, "The Secret Politics of Our Desires" (1998)

Ashis Nandy's insight underscores how Indian cinema not only reflects social values but actively shapes public perceptions of crime, justice, and morality. Bollywood, as the dominant force in Indian popular culture, functions as both mirror and mold—reinforcing cultural ideals and, at times, challenging them.

Cinema is more than entertainment; it is a cultural institution deeply embedded in the social construction of gender, class, and morality (Singh & Kumari, 2024). Through narrative tropes and visual storytelling, Bollywood contributes to how viewers negotiate ideas of power, justice, and identity (Tiwari, 2024). The portrayal of women in particular becomes a valuable site for examining how tradition and modernity intersect in the cinematic imagination (Sahu & Parveen, 2016). This study investigates the portrayal of women in 56 popular Bollywood films released between the 1970s and 2020s. Films were selected based on popularity, critical acclaim, and cultural influence, with a focus on female protagonists and their roles within crime narratives. A dataset of 560 key dialogues was compiled and analyzed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach.

The present study was conducted with the objective of examining the portrayal of women in popular Bollywood films across six decades, through the lens of thematic analysis. To achieve this objective, a total of fifty films were selected—ten from each

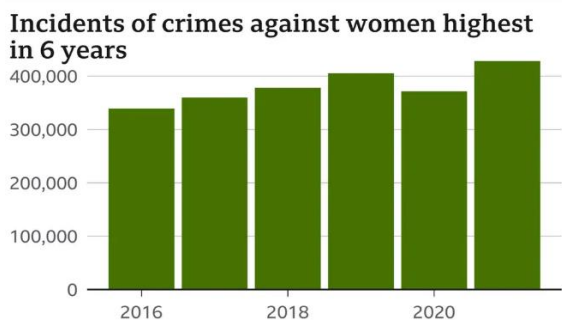
decade spanning the 1970s to the 2020s—based on their popularity and critical acclaim, as listed on platforms such as IMDb and Wikipedia. These films were chosen for their cultural influence and widespread reach, reflecting dominant cinematic narratives of their respective periods. The primary unit of analysis comprised selected dialogues, narrative arcs, and character portrayals of female protagonists within these films. Key scenes and dialogues that reflected women's experiences, roles, and social positioning were transcribed and analyzed. A total 560 dialogues were included in the final dataset.

Indian cinema is not just a form of storytelling—it is a cultural force that shapes how people think about gender, justice, and power. Through recurring themes, iconic characters, and emotionally charged narratives, films often reflect dominant social values while also influencing them. Bollywood, in particular, plays a central role in shaping public attitudes by presenting complex issues in accessible ways. The portrayal of women in crime narratives reveals how cinema both reinforces and challenges societal norms, offering a lens into the evolving tensions between tradition and transformation.

Themes were derived through a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Pre-identified themes included Romantic Idealism, Gender Roles & Patriarchy, Sacrifice & Self-Effacement, and Female Silencing & Respectability Politics. In addition, inductive analysis allowed for the emergence of more nuanced themes such as Emotional Loneliness, Moral Judgment & Social Stigma, Resistance & Moral Courage, and Female Assertion of Autonomy. These themes reveal both continuity and change in how Bollywood narrates women's experiences in the context of crime, justice, and social expectations. Thematic patterns are discussed in the following section using representative dialogues and character arcs to highlight key shifts in cinematic portrayals of women across decades.

❖ Crime Statistics

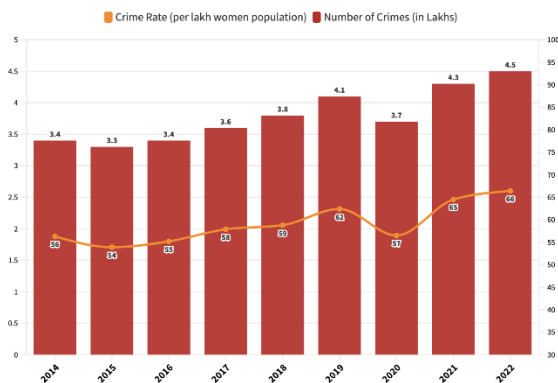
Figure 4.1 - Incidents of Crimes Against Women in 6 years (2016-2021)



Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2016-2021)

In 2021, over 428,000 crimes against women were reported in India—a 26% rise since 2016. The majority involved rape, domestic violence, kidnapping, dowry deaths, and physical assault. The year also saw 107 acid attacks, 1,580 trafficking cases, and 2,668 cybercrimes. Uttar Pradesh reported the most cases (56,000+), followed by Rajasthan (40,738) and Maharashtra (39,526).

Figure 4.2 - Number of Crimes Against Women by Year (2014-2022)



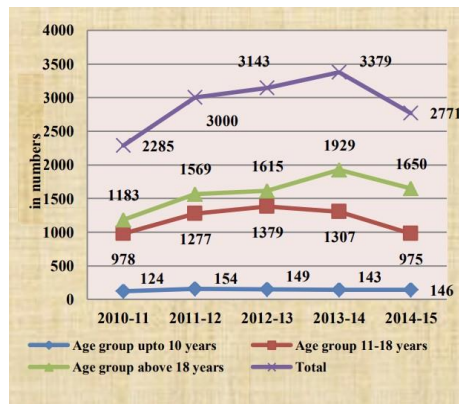
Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2014-2022)

From 2014 to 2022, there was a 31% rise in reported crimes against women. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) documents these incidents under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) as well as various Special and Local Laws (SLL), including legislations like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act. In 2014, the total recorded cases stood at 3,37,922. By 2022, this number had escalated to 4,45,526, indicating a substantial increase in

less than ten years. When measured per one lakh female population, the crime rate also rose from 56.3 in 2014 to 66.4 in 2022.

The only two years within this span that recorded a decline in reported cases compared to their preceding year were 2015 and 2020. In 2015, the number of cases dropped to 3,27,394 from 3,37,922 in 2014, indicating a brief and marginal dip in reported incidents. A more notable decline occurred in 2020, with 3,71,503 cases reported—down from 4,05,861 in 2019. This decrease is widely attributed to the nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns, which restricted public movement and access to reporting mechanisms, rather than a genuine drop in the occurrence of crimes. In fact, several reports during this period suggested that domestic violence and abuse cases may have gone underreported due to victims being confined with perpetrators. Aside from these two years, the data reflects a steady and troubling upward trend in crimes against women, pointing to both increasing incidents and possibly heightened awareness and willingness to report such crimes over time.

Figure 4.3 - Number of Missing Girls/Women since 2010

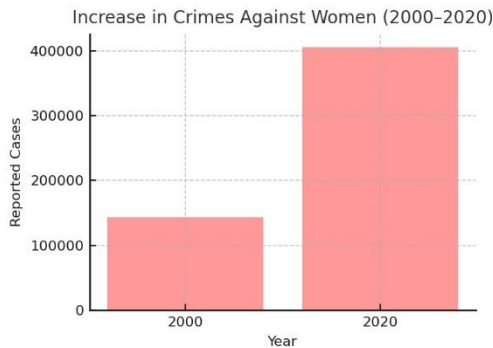


Source: Home (Police) Department

Data from the Home (Police) Department shows a rising trend in missing girls and women between 2010 and 2015, with cases increasing from 2,285 in 2010–11 to a peak of 3,379 in 2013–14, before slightly declining. The 18+ age group had the highest number of missing cases, followed by the 11–18 age group, while the under-10 category remained consistently low. This pattern reflects serious concerns about the

safety and vulnerability of adolescent girls and women, pointing to deeper systemic gaps in prevention and protection mechanisms.

Figure 4.4 - Reported Crimes Against Women in India (2000-2020)



Source: Ghai (2024), *Indian Journal of Law*, 2(4)

According to NCRB data, reported crimes against women in India rose sharply from 143,795 in 2000 to 405,861 in 2020, reflecting a 182% increase. Between 2014 and 2022, cases climbed from 3.4 lakh to 4.5 lakh, with the crime rate rising from 56 to 66 per lakh women. This surge points to both a rise in incidents and improved reporting, underscoring the urgent need for systemic reforms and preventive measures.

This is a grave societal concern, and the underlying reasons for this rise can be understood through two major assumptions. The rise in reported crimes against women may reflect both increased reporting—due to greater awareness, education, and access to justice—and a real escalation in such crimes. Education empowers women to recognize and report violence (UN Women, 2022; NCERT, 2019), but deeper social, cultural, and economic forces also contribute to the prevalence of gender-based violence.

Cinema, as a powerful cultural medium, plays a significant role in shaping public attitudes. Ashis Nandy (1998) described Indian cinema as a “surrogate public sphere” that influences everyday moral discourse. The Indian government itself recognizes cinema as a tool of soft power that shapes national values. While films like *Pink*, *Thappad*, *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, and *Laapataa Ladies* challenge patriarchal norms, they are exceptions. In contrast, commercially successful films

such as Kabir Singh and Animal reinforce toxic masculinity, often glorifying dominance and female subservience.

As Satyajit Ray once said, “Society becomes what we feed it.” Mainstream cinema’s normalization of gendered violence can desensitize audiences and reinforce harmful norms. This study traces how gender portrayals in crime narratives have evolved—revealing both progress and persistent distortions—and highlights the urgent need for more inclusive, ethical, and justice-oriented storytelling.

Discussion

❖ Theme 1: Romantic Idealism as Female Purpose

In Hindi cinema, romantic love has long been portrayed as the defining purpose of a woman’s life. From Bobby (1973) to Kabhi Kabhie (1976), and through the ’80s and ’90s with films like Maine Pyar Kiya and Dil, a woman’s identity is framed around emotional dependence, with love depicted as her ultimate source of completeness. Even seemingly empowered declarations in Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai (2000) still anchor a woman’s strength in romantic commitment. While films like Sanju (2018) and Kabir Singh (2019) begin to show male characters experiencing similar emotional fragility, the narrative continues to equate love with life’s purpose. A subtle shift occurs in Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway (2023), where emotional resilience stems not from romance but motherhood. Yet, even here, a woman’s worth remains rooted in relational identity—whether as lover, wife, or mother. As Khan and Taylor (2019) argue, such portrayals reward conforming to traditional ideals of femininity, reinforcing the notion that a woman’s value lies in being emotionally needed and chosen. A dominant trend in mainstream Bollywood from the 1970s–1990s was portraying women’s primary purpose as romantic fulfillment. These narratives normalize devotion and emotional dependence, shaping audience expectations of female behavior.

❖ Theme 2: Gender Roles & Patriarchy

Bollywood has long tied a woman’s identity to marriage, portraying her as incomplete without a husband—as seen in Pakeezah (1972), Seeta Aur Geeta (1972), and Kranti (1981). This narrative continues through the ’80s and ’90s, with films like Dil (1990) suggesting that a woman’s respectability begins only after marriage. Though the 2000s introduced moments of female autonomy in films like Kaho Naa...

Pyaar Hai and 3 Idiots, these are often overshadowed by the glorification of marital conformity. Ray (2015) notes that nationalist cinema reinforces femininity through domestic roles. However, recent films like *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) and *Laapataa Ladies* (2024) challenge this framing, signaling a gradual shift toward portraying women as individuals beyond their marital status. Marriage and domesticity defined women's identities in earlier decades. Films reinforced social norms of "respectable" femininity and influenced public perceptions of moral and social roles.

❖ Theme 3: Sacrifice & Self-Effacement

Bollywood has long glorified the self-sacrificing woman, portraying tyag (sacrifice) and samarpan (devotion) as defining virtues. Films like *Pakeezah* (1972), *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972), and *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) depict women erasing their desires for family honor, framing silent suffering as strength. This continued into the '90s and 2000s with *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*, *Raja Hindustani*, and *Devdas*, reinforcing the ideal of the enduring woman. As Khan and Taylor (2019) note, such portrayals often blur the line between choice and compulsion. However, films like *Thappad* (2020) disrupt this narrative, questioning why women must bear emotional burdens. Dialogues like "Maine toh apni puri life invest kari hai tumhare saath" reflect a shift toward asserting emotional equity. While the trope of sacrifice remains, contemporary cinema is beginning to challenge its moral pedestal.

❖ Theme 4: Female Silencing & Respectability Politics

Earlier films rewarded silence and punished defiance. Contemporary works such as *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) portray women asserting voice and visibility, indicating evolving societal attitudes toward female agency. For decades, Hindi cinema linked a woman's respectability to silence, obedience, and self-restraint—traits portrayed as safeguards of family honor. From *Pakeezah* (1972) to *Tezaab* (1988), women were praised for submission and punished for defiance. Even in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), Simran's compliance is idealized. While the 2000s introduced hints of resistance in films like *Gadar* (2001) and *Om Shanti Om* (2007), such moments were still framed within traditional norms. A notable shift emerges in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), where the protagonist challenges the very idea of female chastity and silence. Her assertiveness signals a cinematic turn—toward honoring women for their voice, not their silence.

❖ **Theme 5: Emotional Loneliness and Identity Crisis**

A dominant trend in mainstream commercial Bollywood has been the depiction of emotional loneliness and identity crises, often showing characters—male and female—struggling with self-worth and belonging. From *Anand* (1971) and *Deewar* (1975) to *Tezaab* (1988), many protagonists wrestle with inner emptiness. Women, in particular, are frequently defined by relational roles, leading to self-erasure, as seen in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). Kapur (2006) critiques cinema’s neglect of women’s inner lives, though this trend is gradually shifting. In films such as *Devdas* (2002), *Highway* (2014), and *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), solitude becomes a space for self-realization, marking a movement from silent suffering toward emotional selfhood. From *Anand* (1971) and *Deewar* (1975) to *Tezaab* (1988), protagonists wrestle with inner emptiness. Women, in particular, are frequently defined by relational roles, leading to self-erasure, as seen in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). Kapur (2006) critiques cinema’s neglect of women’s inner lives, though this is changing. In films like *Devdas* (2002), *Highway* (2014), and *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), solitude becomes a space for self-realization, marking a shift from silent suffering to emotional selfhood.

❖ **Theme 6: Moral Judgment & Social Stigma**

Bollywood has long reflected how women whose lives fall outside patriarchal norms—sex workers, dancers, single mothers, ambitious professionals—are denied dignity and judged through rigid ideas of morality. From *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978) and *Pakeezah* (1972) to *Tezaab* (1988) and *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985), women are reduced to their social roles, with honour (*izzat*) tied to silence, modesty, and sacrifice. Lines like “*Tawaif sirf tamasha hai*” and “*apni maryada mein rehna*” reinforce the idea that respect must be earned through obedience. Even domestic roles in *Beta* (1992) define worth through servitude and submission. Yet over time, cracks appear—*No Entry* (2005), *3 Idiots* (2009), and *Mom* (2017) confront societal double standards, asserting that morality is not defined by appearances. *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) boldly reframes shame as resistance, with the protagonist reclaiming her story on her own terms. Recent films like *Pink*, *Talvar*, and *Kahaani* spotlight women who challenge these moral expectations, offering a counter-narrative that defies judgment and asserts agency. As Khan and Taylor (2019) note, these portrayals signal a shift where resistance is no longer framed as disobedience but as a rightful demand for justice and respect.

❖ Theme 7: Resistance and Moral Courage

A recurring theme in Bollywood, especially in films like *Roti Kapda Aur Makaan* (1974) and *Zanjeer* (1973), is the portrayal of individuals who challenge societal injustice and oppressive norms. Dialogues such as “Samaj ki soch ko badalne ki zaroorat hai” and “Har insaan joh paap se, zulm se ladta hai wohi bhagwan hota hai” frame resistance as a moral imperative, emphasizing personal courage and ethical conviction. These narratives valorize defiance against structural inequalities, inspiring audiences to question traditional hierarchies and reinforcing cinema’s role as a medium for social critique and consciousness-raising.

❖ Theme 8: Disillusionment with Social Institutions

Bollywood increasingly portrays disillusionment with institutions—family, state, education, and marriage—that promise justice but often betray it. Early films like *Roti Kapda Aur Makaan* (1974) and *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) showed how women’s autonomy is suppressed within these structures. Idealized roles, like motherhood in *Tezaab* (1988), mask a lack of real support—a critique echoed in *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway* (2023). Cultural criminology helps explain this glamorization, which forms part of the crime–media–crime cycle, wherein media portrayals of violence both draw from and reinforce societal fascination with transgression. Films such as *Devdas* (2002), *Sherni* (2021), and *Laapataa Ladies* (2024) depict resistance rising from within broken systems. As Ray (2015) notes, tradition often silences women—but today’s cinema increasingly gives them voice, agency, and a demand for justice.

❖ Theme 9: Female Objectification

From a feminist criminology lens, these patterns reflect the structural power imbalance that defines patriarchal systems, where women’s bodies become sites of control and symbolic violence. Indian cinema has long objectified women—visually, emotionally, and domestically—through a persistent male gaze that frames them as bodies to admire, possess, or control. From the romanticized fetishization in *Pakeezah* (1972) and the voyeuristic spectacle in *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978), to the eroticized metaphors of *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985), women are repeatedly narrated rather than heard. Films like *Qurbani* (1980) and *Hukumat* (1987) reinforce domestic objectification, limiting women to caretaking roles while men lead and fight. In *Tezaab* (1988), love becomes sacrifice, and by Kabir Singh (2019), toxic possession is mistaken for passion—reducing women to “bandi” or property. As Derné (2000) observed, cinema both mirrors and fuels male fantasies, making

women visual subjects rather than narrative agents. Women were visually and narratively objectified, limiting their roles to bodies or plot devices. Recent narratives increasingly depict women as agents rather than objects. Though some recent films push back, the legacy of objectification still shapes how women are seen—and more crucially, how they are allowed to exist—on screen.

❖ **Theme 10: Love as Entrapment**

Romantic narratives often presented love as coercion or self-erasure. Contemporary films show moments of resistance, highlighting changing perceptions of relationships and emotional autonomy. While Bollywood often idealizes romantic love as transformative, it frequently portrays love as a form of emotional confinement—especially for women. Films like *Roti Kapda Aur Makaan* (1974) and *Kabhi Kabhie* (1976) depict love as a gilded cage, demanding silence, sacrifice, and self-erasure. From *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) to *Saajan* (1991), female characters are expected to suffer silently, reinforcing love as a burden rather than liberation. Through the feminist criminological framework, love is constructed not merely as an emotion but as a disciplinary tool used to enforce gendered obedience. Even declarations like “Tumhare bina zindagi adhoori hai” (*Maine Pyar Kiya*, 1989) and “Main tumse pyaar karti hoon, par keh nahi sakti” (*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, 1998) romanticize dependency and emotional suppression. Through a cultural criminological lens, darker portrayals like *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023) can be seen to construct a narrative “script” for romantic relationships in which possessiveness and abuse are framed as desirable passion. This normalization of coercive control has direct implications for audiences, particularly young viewers, potentially shaping perceptions of the boundaries between romantic pursuit and criminal harassment. As Chakravorty and Bera (2022) note, this normalizes masculinity that thrives on dominance. Though moments of resistance appear—*Gadar* (2001), *Devdas* (2002), *Thappad* (2020)—they remain exceptions. Across decades, these narratives show that cinematic love often traps women in emotional cages, demanding endurance and silence in the name of devotion.

❖ **Theme 11: Female Assertion of Autonomy**

Departing from decades of submissive portrayals, contemporary Hindi cinema increasingly showcases women as autonomous, self-defining agents. Characters in *3 Idiots* (2009), *Pink* (2016), *Dangal* (2016), *Sherni* (2021), and *Laapataa Ladies* (2024) claim their space, voice, and dignity without seeking permission. Dialogues like “Main apni value jaanti hoon” and “No means no” (*Pink*) directly confront systems

that trivialize female agency. Recent cinema depicts women claiming agency, space, and voice. These narratives reflect broader societal changes in gender norms and expectations.

Whether rejecting ornamental roles (*Ek Tha Tiger*, 2012), dreaming freely (*Laapataa Ladies*), or disrupting patriarchal blueprints (*Enthiran*, 2010), these characters act decisively, not reactively. As Ray (2015) observes, this cinematic shift reframes female autonomy not as deviance but as legitimacy—marking a cultural moment where women are no longer metaphors, but narrators of their own lives. This shift aligns with feminist criminology’s focus on reclaiming agency within patriarchal systems, highlighting resistance as a form of structural defiance.

Recent films have begun offering something long overdue: women who define themselves on their own terms. Whether it’s the athletes in *Dangal*, the forest officer in *Sherni*, or the missing brides in *Laapataa Ladies*, these characters reject societal definitions and write their own. Ray (2015) highlights this narrative evolution as part of a broader feminist awakening in Indian cinema—where autonomy is not rebellion, but recognition. These women are not rebels for defying norms; they are simply claiming the right to live on their own terms.

This theme is about taking up space—not always with slogans, but with presence, choice, and self-possession. These women do not wait for permission. They act. They assert. They become.

These cinematic narratives do more than entertain—they shape public understandings of crime, justice, and victimhood. By portraying moral dilemmas and ethical ambiguity, films influence perceptions of who is deemed “guilty” or “innocent,” subtly guiding audiences’ sense of moral judgment. When characters encounter systemic failures—corrupt authorities, delayed justice, or institutional indifference—viewers may experience a form of vicarious disillusionment with formal legal institutions. This aligns closely with criminological concerns about procedural justice, which emphasizes that legitimacy of the law relies not just on outcomes but on fair and transparent processes. When cinema repeatedly depicts law enforcement or judicial systems as biased, inefficient, or morally compromised, it can erode public trust in legal institutions, affecting perceptions of legitimacy and compliance. Themes of moral judgment and institutional disillusionment thus serve as narrative lenses through which audiences negotiate ideas of justice, fairness, and

societal norms, highlighting the intersection between media representation and public attitudes toward crime and law enforcement. The found themes are interpreted through the combined lenses of feminist criminology and cultural criminology. Feminist criminology foregrounds gendered power relations and patriarchal control, while cultural criminology emphasises the symbolic, affective, and aesthetic dimensions of crime representation. Together, these frameworks guide the interpretation of cinematic patterns across decades.

Conclusion

This study examined the portrayal of women in Bollywood crime films from the 1970s to the 2020s, revealing a gradual yet significant shift from depictions rooted in sacrifice, silence, and subservience to narratives centred on female autonomy, resistance, and self-definition. Through thematic analysis of 56 culturally influential films, it became evident that while earlier portrayals reinforced patriarchal ideals and respectability politics, more recent works—such as *Pink*, *Thappad*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi*—position women as central agents in challenging injustice and reclaiming narrative power.

The findings affirm the view that Bollywood serves as both a reflection of and a participant in cultural discourse, shaping public perceptions of gender, crime, and justice. Films increasingly function not just as entertainment, but as ideological tools capable of resistance, critique, and transformation. However, despite visible progress, these portrayals remain inconsistent and often bound by commercial imperatives and societal expectations.

The implications of this research extend to media studies, feminist theory, and criminology, highlighting the urgent need for socially responsible storytelling. For media studies, this research provides a longitudinal framework to analyze how cultural narratives in Indian cinema evolve and influence audience perceptions. For feminist theory, it charts the historical trajectory of patriarchal representations, illuminating shifts in the portrayal of women's agency, autonomy, and social value. For criminology, it demonstrates how cinematic depictions shape public understandings of crime, justice, and gendered victimization, underscoring the importance of critical media literacy and socially conscious storytelling.

Limitations and Future Implications

While this study offers rigorous qualitative analysis, it is limited by its focus on mainstream Hindi cinema, excluding regional and independent films that may present more varied gender portrayals. It also lacks audience reception data, limiting insight into how these narratives are received or internalized.

Future research should examine audience responses through surveys or focus groups, and compare gender portrayals across regional and OTT platforms. Including behind-the-scenes gender dynamics and using intersectional frameworks—accounting for caste, class, and sexuality—would enrich the analysis. Integrating socially conscious films into education and policy could further leverage cinema as a tool for awareness and reform.

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