

Chapter 7: From sacrifice to selfhood: belated female agency in contemporary Hindi cinema

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Abstract: For decades, the mainstream Hindi Cinema has idealised women as self-sacrificing wives or mothers, with patience, silence, and emotional endurance as their defining traits. Within marriage and family life, such representations have historically reinforced patriarchal expectations. After years of fulfilling socially prescribed roles, more recent films have, however, appeared to complicate this narrative by portraying women who begin questioning these expectations. This emerging pattern is referred to as ‘belated agency’ in this chapter. It is a form of self-assertion that surfaces later in life rather than during youth. It does not imply delayed empowerment alone; rather, it captures the negotiation of dignity within existing familial relationships. While feminist scholarship has extensively examined gender representation in Indian cinema, most analyses focus on young protagonists or narratives of early rebellion. Comparatively, less attention has been given to cinematic stories. The stories in which middle-aged women negotiate dignity, voice, and recognition after long-term marital conformity. This chapter uses a qualitative textual and thematic approach to examine a few relevant significant Hindi or Bollywood Films released after 2010, such as English Vinglish, Thappad, and Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani. Alongside the broader cultural conversations surrounding these films, close attention is paid to key moments in the narratives, character interactions, and emotionally significant scenes. The analysis suggests that contemporary Hindi cinema increasingly acknowledges women’s emotional self-respect and personal aspirations as legitimate concerns. The films depict subtle negotiations within family structures. Rather than a dramatic rebellion. In conclusion, the women portrayed in Hindi Cinemas now point towards a noticeable shift in how middle-aged women are represented on screen. It moves beyond sacrifice toward dignity and agency.

Keywords: Belated Agency; Women, Hindi Cinema; Emotional Labor; Feminist Media Studies; Long-term Marriage

1 Introduction

In Hindi Cinema, women have often been shown in a very fixed way. For many years, movies mostly showed women as the ideal wife or mother who sacrifices everything for the sake of her family. She stays quiet, adjusts to every situation, and keeps tolerating the adversities in her life without complaining. Her values are often judged by how much pain she could handle and how loyal she remained to her husband and family, even if her