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Men Written by Women: The Female Gaze, Evolving Masculinity, and The Soft Hero in Contemporary Indian Cinema

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Abstract:

The phrase 'Men written by women' recently gained attention in various social media platforms in the context of male characters who are emotionally active, kind and respectful towards their female counterparts. In simple terms, they are the ideal men written through the female gaze. In feminist film theory, the Female gaze represents the gaze of filmmaker which aims to bring in light female experience and subjectivities in the circle of cinema and making space for female spectatorship. It was developed to counterbalance its opposite 'male gaze' by Laura Mulvey, who argues that male gaze is profoundly employed in cinema to satisfy the voyeuristic pleasure of men. The paper applies the concept of 'female gaze' in the mainstream Indian cinema and studies how female screenwriters are challenging the old hypermasculine male characters and pushing towards a softer side of masculinity. This paper looks at the recent scripts penned down by prominent female screenwriters having soft male characters and studies how they evolve and what they reveal about the changing gender dynamics. The research highlights the power of female gaze in cinema to not only challenge the rigid and unflexible ideals of masculinity but also provides us with the fictional version of these ideal soft heroes which reflects women desire for more equal relationship. The paper also notes that the aspirational portrayals of masculinity in Indian films are positively influencing viewers, thereby reshaping their perspectives on gender ideals.

Keywords: Masculinity, Female screenwriters, Swoonworthy heroes, Female gaze, Contemporary Indian cinema, Aspirational masculinity.

Introduction

Around 2020-2021, the internet was flooded with the phrase ‘men written by women’ in the context of male characters who are gentle, emotionally complex, and treat their female counterparts with respect and care. On social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok, people shared reels of such relatable characters from movies and dramas. While the online trend is recent, the underlying concepts are not new. The theory of the female gaze was developed in relation to the theory of the male gaze put forward by Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in terms of classical Hollywood cinema. According to Mulvey, “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (808), which explains that in traditional cinema, women were presented as mere decorative objects to be looked at, and not as a character who has her own views and feelings. In the 1980s, several early essayists and aspiring film critics contributed to developing discourses around female subjectivities and the notion of female spectatorship. They pointed out that women view films differently and deserve representation in both story and structure. Hence with passage of time the development of female gaze in feminist film theory take place which tends to create more realistic and emotionally complex characters, both male and female. Filmmakers and writers employed the concept of female gaze not only to brought in women viewpoints but also presenting male characters which seems more ‘real’ than ‘ideal’ human beings. In Indian cinema as well, many female screenwriters are actively using the female gaze as a narrative tool to produce more realistic characters (male) rather than simply idealising them. Although a lot of research have been done on male gaze and its deteriorating effects but limited attention had been provided to the use of female gaze in the Indian cinema context and how female screenwriters are using them as a narrative tool

to rebuild the ideals of masculinity or making the 'soft boys'. The research paper aims to fill the gap and study more about the use of female gaze in Indian cinema context to understand how they are changing the gender norms around masculinity. The research paper also attempts to address the following research questions:

- How have female screenwriters in contemporary Indian cinema been redefining male characters to embody empathy and emotional intelligence?
- What specific traits define the 'soft hero' in recent Indian films, and how do they are in contrast with traditional masculinity?
- Are these portrayals realistic representations of Indian men, or do they function primarily as fictional ideals shaped by female desire?
- How does the female gaze influence the depiction of aspirational masculinity and what impact does it have on societal perceptions?

This research followed a qualitative, content-based analysis to study the characteristics of 'Swoonworthy Heroes' (male characters) written by female screenwriters in contemporary Indian cinema by employing the 'Female Gaze'. The paper tries to act as a convergent viewpoint between the sociology of cinema, masculinity, and gender research. The approach used is interpretive in nature. An intended sample of 7-8 contemporary Indian Hindi films (released post-2010) has been selected. The primary criterion is that the film must have a female screenwriter or co-writer and feature a central male character who exhibits the traits of the 'Soft Hero'. A detailed script analysis and visual analysis of the selected films is conducted. The research aims to bring light to the evolving archetype of new heroes (male characters) in Indian cinema and what they reveal about changing ideals around masculinity and gender norms.

Audiences have long seen cinematic heroes who are tough, unemotional and protectors of the family but this paper examines the emergence and development of the soft hero who are heartwarming, caring and do not shy away from expressing their feelings and vulnerabilities.

Literature review

The concept of the female gaze is of considerable importance in the field of gender and cinema studies. Developing as a counterforce to the degrading male gaze, the female gaze is empowering and more realistic. According to Hyma Balkrishnan in her journal The Politics of (Fe)male Gaze in Hindi Cinema, "The female gaze validates people and their emotions" (134). By bringing the true emotions of characters, female gaze can be utilized in the Indian cinema context to normalise the concept of emotional and sensitive man and rejecting the stoic and rigid thought of 'Mard ko kabhi dard nahi hota' (A man never feels pain). It is not the inverse of male gaze rather it is more diverse. It shows the female perspectives about how they perceive the world and adding a new lens through which films can show equal representations of both gender viewpoints.

Unearthing Toxic Masculinity: A Female Gaze analysis of Male characters in Parched and Darlings by Nishta N. Sharma reveals that by applying the female gaze to films like *Parched* and *Darlings*, it performs two key functions: firstly, it acts as a powerful lens to expose and deconstruct the harmful societal standards and toxic masculinity prevalent in male characters and secondly, it possesses the potential to innovate film storytelling by shifting the focus from traditional narratives to the authentic female perspectives. Similarly, in The Panorama of Female Gaze in Indian Cinema: A Case Study of '*Parched*' by Ms. N. Tamilselvi highlights the use of female gaze to analyse women centric movies directed by female filmmakers. It employs theory of identification by Murray Smith in relation to female gaze and argues that female spectators tend to associate themselves with the women on screen due to

similar experiences with patriarchy at the individual level. The paper addresses the need to introduce other types of gaze to the audience which are constructive. Both of the research papers discussed above argues that female gaze can be utilized as a tool to put foreward women subjectivities in the films and also expose the toxic masculinity prevalent in the society. However, the paper above excludes the emerging idea of 'aspirational masculinity' which is studying the soft boys created by female screenwriters through female gaze.

Nessrine Salem Mirete's Men Written By Women: Masculinity And The Female Gaze In *Pride And Prejudice*, *Little Women* And *Good Wives*, traces the history of introduction of female gaze in literature. The paper argues that male characters, specifically Fitzwilliam Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Theodore Lawrence in *Little Women* (1868) and *Good Wives* (1896), from nineteenth-century novels were different from the prevalent male heroes of that period because they embody a contemporary ideal of masculinity known on social media as 'men written by women'. The research also incorporates cinematic adaptation theories to understand the portrayal of these figures on screen. It illustrates the fresh perspective of masculinity that is, rationality with sensibility which was the reason behind their success. Although the research paper discussed above reveals important findings about the emergence of soft heroes in literature and cinema and their reception and how later they got re-emerged on social media, there is still gap in how these characters got popularized in the Indian cinema context. This paper aims to examine the unexplored area of research regarding the utilisation of the female gaze in Indian cinema to depict soft male characters. The focus is on how Indian female screenwriters are employing the female gaze to create authentic and relatable male characters who challenge old notions of masculinity. Specifically, this paper will analyze the traits and popularity of these soft male characters, examining what they reveal about changing image of masculinity within the unique cultural context of Indian cinema.

Case studies

The research will analyze the male characters through their dialogue and interactions with other characters (both male and female) to explore how these male heroes are perceived as more realistic and well approved by female audiences.

Rana Chaudhary in *Piku* (written by Juhi Chaturvedi)

In the movie titled *Piku,* the main story centres around Piku (female lead), a headstrong girl living with her old-age father, Bashkor, who is a hypochondriac and obsessed with his motion problem (bowel movement). The character in focus here is Rana, owner of a dry-witted taxi company, who follows both of them (Piku and Bashkor) along the road journey from Delhi to Calcutta. Rana is an empathetic and patient man who respects and supports Piku's independence and choices, without forcing his ideas on her. In the movie, Rana helps Piku to make decisions whether to choose between practicality or her traditional roots (by selling her ancestral home 'Champakunj') without overpowering her decision-making power. In another instance, he takes a stand for Piku when Bhaskor blames her for thinking of him as a burden to her. Rana made Bhaskor realise how much she cares for him when he says: "Emotional blackmail krke parents ko pta nahi kya sukh milta h" (Wonder why parents feel satisfied in emotionally blackmailing their kids), (01:17:04-01:17:07). Till the end of the movie, he even befriends the arrogant Bhaskor and provides him with many solutions to cure his constipation and also advises him to enjoy eating: "Ye namak churana band kar dijiye aap" (Stop hiding salt), (01:41:19- 01:41:21). So, it is concluded that Rana's heartwarming portrayal perfectly fits the criteria of our 'soft hero'.

Dan Walia in *October* (written by Juhi Chaturvedi)

The movie *October* is about a hotel management intern named Dan, who shows unconditional love and care for his colleague Shivali, who suffers from a life-threatening accident. Dan is a very interesting character who portrays a different side of masculinity. Dan

redefines heartbreak by portraying enduring grief through patience and kindness, rather than the usual display of self-destructive behaviours. Dan shows the innocent side of masculinity as he talks like a child but takes a stand for Shivali against her own blood relatives: "Usse to koi puche uska decision wo kyun marna chahegi" (Ask her…I don't think she wants to die), (00:57:06-00:57:11). One interesting fact to note in the movie is that there is no romantic relationship between the two leads (Dan and Shivali), but he shows selfless love and unwavering care for her, showing that men can also exist in unconditional relationships. So, Dan is not the typical bollywood hero, he is different because his love and unwavering care for Shivali were quiet, pure, and selfless without any expectations.

Dr Jahangir Khan in *Dear Zindagi* (written and directed by Gauri Shinde)

The movie *Dear Zindagi* is all about a compassionate, empathetic, and non-judgmental therapist who helps the female protagonist in comprehending her own emotions, without imposing traditional male traits. Dr Jahangir Khan, aka Jug, guides the female protagonist Kaira to come to terms with her love problems, her deep anxiety, loneliness, and her sour relationship with her parents. The character is realistically crafted because he is not shown as an ideal male protagonist, the know-it-all persona instead he too is facing problems in his relationships. When Kaira expresses her love for him, he understands her emotions and politely rejects her feelings. So, Dr Jug offers us a fresh perspective on manliness: men who listen, appreciate, and guide us without overpowering us.

Iqbal Syed in *Raazi* (written by Megha Gulzar and Bhavani Iyer)

Raazi is a movie about a young Indian spy named Sehmat, who is married into a Pakistani military family by her father to work as a spy for India before the Indo-Pakistan War in 1971. Syed Iqbal, who is Sehmat's husband, is a tranquil and emotionally available man, a kind of spouse that the world swoons over. Despite being an army officer, Iqbal exudes calm

and poise. He shows deep empathy towards his wife Sehmat, who sacrifices not just her family but also her nation when she marries him. Throughout the film, Iqbal is torn between his love for Sehmat and his duty to his country. He is portrayed as a complex character with conflicting emotions and beliefs, which makes his interactions with Sehmat all the more intense and real. Iqbal's character shines as the perfect husband as he respects his wife's interests, understands the importance of consent, and supports her in finding her own footing. He clears his stand by saying: “Ye walden ne to lakr mila diya, lekin hum b to sabr se jan le ek-dusre ko…” (I know our fathers made this match but, we must get to know each other, for ourselves…), (00:34:34-00:34:40).

Mc Sher in *Gully Boy* (written by Reema Kagti and Joya Akhtar)

Gully Boy tells the story of an underdog, Murad living in the slums of Mumbai. He wants to escape from his difficult life and dreams of becoming a rapper. The character in focus is MC Sher, who is also a rapper and provides moral and emotional support to Murad (the main lead). He also provides him (Murad) a safe space to be vulnerable, a quality that is often excluded from the traditional portrayals of male friendship. The character of MC Sher as a rapper is the opposite of what is often portrayed in cinema. He is tough and commanding on-stage, but he is also kind and nurturing off-stage. He provides Murad with the tools and encouragement needed to pursue his dreams and gradually pushes him towards honest self-expression. In an important scene, when he loses a rap battle to Murad, his joyous hug for his friend challenges notions of hyper-masculine competitiveness and highlights his deep-seated affection devoid of any ego. Sher is not portrayed as a weak character but rather he is strong enough to be compassionate and selfless in a world that often celebrates ruthless ambition.

Shutu in *A Death in the Gunj* (written and directed by Konkana Sen Sharma)

The movie *A Death in the Gunj* tells the story of the largely invisible and heartbreakingly alone Shutu, who is a portrait of innocence, a quality that is rarely seen in male characters. Shutu is a sensitive, introverted, and highly depressed young man who is a victim of his self-involved family's emotional neglect and the toxic masculinity of its male members. His cousin Nandu believes the only way to teach boys to drive is through beatings. Mimi (family friend) rejects his love because she thinks he is not manly enough, and Vikramjeet (Nandu's friend) beats him up in a rage during a kabaddi game when he begins to score. Just like a child, he lies about his results and spends time with his niece playing around trees, reading books, and drawing insects. The movie is a powerful commentary on how society often fails to see and value gentleness in men, leaving those who do not fit the mould to be forgotten and destroyed.

Deepak in *Laapataa Ladies* (written by Kiran Rao and Sneha Desai)

The movie *Laapataa ladies* tells the story of two young brides Phool and Jaya whose lives are thrown into chaos due to mistaken identity on a train. Deepak loses his newlywed wife, Phool and mistakenly brings someone else's wife and later embarks on a journey to find Phool. Deepak is portrayed as a innocent, and kind-hearted man who represents a refreshing and progressive form of masculinity in a patriarchal, rural Indian setting. Instead of reacting as a hot-headed man, he navigates challenging circumstances with grace and compassion. He refuses to entertain misogynistic remarks made by his friends against his wife. He supports Jaya for prioritising her dreams by telling her: "Sapna dekhne ka mafi nahi mangte h" (Don't apologize for having a dream), (01:56:15-01:56:17). His earnestness is captured when he awkwardly tries to impress his newlywed wife Phool with the only English phrase he knows:

'I Love You'(00:43:40-00:43:42) and his shy smile reveals his genuine love. So, he can be described as a 'safe space' for the women around him.

Ashwin from Sir (written and directed by Rohena Gera)

Ashwin in the movie *Sir* is portrayed as a rich and well-educated man who falls in love with Ratna, his live-in housemaid. His relationship with Ratna is built on quiet moments of connection and mutual respect, rather than grand romantic gestures. He wears the shirt gifted by Ratna, supports her dream of becoming a fashion designer by gifting her a sewing machine, and also encourages her to pursue a better life. Ashwin does not fit in the mold of a typical action hero who starts a violent or aggressive fight against the class system instead he challenges it quietly by simply loving and respecting Ratna.

Interpretation of case studies

The primary interpretation presents that female screenwriters are actively using the 'Female Gaze' to dismantle the ideals of old 'macho men' of Indian cinema and build a fresh, aspirational 'Soft Hero' who derives strength not from emotional inhibition or physical build-up but from empathy, patience, and emotional intelligence.

Redefining Male Strength and Heroism

Characters like Rana (*Piku)*, Dr Jug (*Dear Zindagi*), and Ashwin (*Sir*) are categorised as 'Heroes' precisely because they are supportive listeners and emotional guides who instil their heroism in the domestic and psychological realms rather than the public and physical. The character of Dan (*October*) shows that romantic love can be unconditional and selfless, devoid of sexual or possessive expectations. This new ideal directly challenges the old one that was a possessive, often toxic, romantic hero seen in films like Kabir Singh (2019) and Animal (2023). Mc Sher (*Gully Boy*) provides a new dimension to male friendship. His authentic and egoless

joy when Murad outshines him in the rap battle redefines the unmerciful, 'win-at-all-costs' masculine ethos.

Role in Gender Dynamics and Relationships

These case studies present a consistent vision of equal and respectful relationships where the male character provides a 'safe space' for the female protagonist's autonomy. Prioritising consent and gradual emotional bonding are a rare phenomenon in arranged marriage settings, but Iqbal (*Raazi*) is a great example who precisely communicates the need to 'take our time to truly know each other' scenario. Similarly, Deepak (*Laapataa Ladies*) respects Jaya's dreams and positions himself as an ally, not as patriarchal authority. Rana's openness to absorb the emotional chaos of the father-daughter relationship in *Piku* and Dan's relentless and patient care shifts the portrayal of emotional labour in *October*. The male character willingly takes on roles of nurturing and patience, and normalises this behaviour as a desirable masculine trait.

Critique of 'Traditional Masculine Ideology'

Shutu (*A Death in the Gunj*) is the most poignant example, which shows how the rigid traditional masculine ideology is a social disease that hurts men as well. His sensitivity and introverted personality sideline him from the mainstream masculinity, leading to his tragic ending. However several others male characters do challenge it, as Deepak's deliberate efforts towards challenging situation in a rural, patriarchal setting (*Laapataa Ladies*) and Ashwin's quiet resistance of class barriers for love and respect (*Sir*) portray that an effective challenge to social standards does not require angry young man aggression but can be achieved through kindness, controlled action, and emotional honesty.

Real or Aspirational male heroes

The female-written soft hero can be described as an aspirational archetype created by the female gaze. Movies like *Piku* and *Gully Boy* present their characters in everyday settings that are relatable. However, the continuous pattern of elevated empathy, emotional availability, and unwavering respect shown by male characters across the case studies shows that these characters are being created out of a desire for more equal and fulfilling relationships, which is in contrast to the toxic masculinity that has often been highlighted positively. They represent the real men who embody virtues like empathy, vulnerability, and respect that are prerequisites for healthy relationships and personal growth. However, they can also be fictional ideals, a cinematic aspiration intended to push societal and cinematic expectations of what a desirable, modern man should be. In essence, these characters represent an emerging reality of masculinity in India, but also serve as a blueprint for a more inclusive and desirable future of gender dynamics.

Conclusion

Sneha Desai, in conversation with SheThePeople, discussed her approach to character writing where she perfectly explains how cinematic representations can be used as a tool for societal transformations. She shared, "I think as Indians, we take up messages, absorb social comments, and change when it is told through an entertaining medium. There is a greater chance of acceptance when a social commentary is made through stories rather than compelled through orders" (Daliya). So, through the medium of cinema, we show the idealised versions of relationships and personal qualities that people can relate to and follow. Hence, movies can serve as a powerful medium to portray and normalise the idealised versions of relationships and personal qualities. Though we live in promising times with respect to the gender lens in

content, we must keep pushing until outdated gender assignments no longer colour or appropriate the patterns of storytelling.

This research aimed to study the new ideals of masculinity presented in Indian Hindi cinema by employing a feminist film theory, 'female gaze'. This paper examined the portrayal of cinematic male characters developed by female screenwriters by specifically focusing on a new wave of male characters that are complex, realistic, and emotionally rich and those who defy the stereotypical male archetype: the strong, protective, and often emotionally distant figure. By utilising this concept of the Female Gaze, female screenwriters are adding new dimensions and nuances to male characters and are breaking the one-dimensional stereotypes around masculinity. It is important to remember that the female gaze does not demean or glorify any other gender. The female gaze attempts to give women the sort of power that men have in the male gaze. Women perceive relationships, situations, and people in a unique way which is reflected in their writings. It is debatable whether only women can effectively write men, but undeniably, they bring unique perspectives and life experiences to the table, regardless of the film's focus, which results in better-rounded characters with more authentic voices, and there is demand for that.

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