1.1 Introduction

Ashis Nandy (1981) mentioned a Bengali poet who once lamented that whenever a clock chimed in an Indian film; it would be sure that the clock chimed twelve times. The poet was hinting towards the melodramatic nature of the Indian film. While an Indian film, specifically a Hindi popular film, can be characterized by its melodramatic structure and often predictable story lines, the sheer size of the industry and the historic role it has played in terms of being the dominant entertainment form in India cannot be underestimated. Popular Hindi cinema while conspicuously absent from international film awards holds sway over Indian masses. It has given this country superstars, whom the public loves and adores. More importantly, “popular cinema engages with everyday lives and experiences in ways that are unique” (Mazumdar, 2007). Ahmed (1992) is of the opinion that in spite of the vulgarity and extravagance of the popular Indian film, it allows important insights with in which people live, and popular cinema points to the dreams and the dilemmas of the society.

The Indian film industry boasts of impressive figures: it is not only the largest film industry in the world, it is the ninth largest industry within the country and employs millions of people and sells billions of tickets globally. The industry produces over 1,250 feature films in a year. Bollywood, specifically, has been acknowledged by the investors as a prominent industry with immense growth potential that recorded a growth rate of 360 percent from 1998 to 2005 (Subramanyam, 2000; Lorenzen & Täube, 2008).

The Indian film industry is located in five cities: Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Bangalore and Hyderabad. However, the films emanating from the industry in Mumbai, often called Bombay, defines the Indian film industry. Bollywood is another name for the film industry based in Mumbai. The name itself was created by the English press in India during the 1970s (Ganti, 2004) and it is Bollywood that not only has a national audience, but in the recent years has achieved an increasing international reach, though international release of Bollywood films is targeted at the Indian diaspora. Popular cinema in India has managed to survive the overwhelming presence of Hollywood worldwide. In its hundred plus years of existence, Bollywood continues to captivate the audience with its distinct charm. The fascination of Indians
with films can be gauged from the fact that even as a British colony India was the third largest producer of films (Ganti, 2004).

On an everyday basis, approximately 15 million people flock to theatres for cinema viewing. By virtue of its huge viewership, Hindi cinema happens to be the biggest segment of the Indian film industry. Cinema was born in a form to creatively portray social reality, only to be commercialized for the profit prioritization goals of its makers. Film makers sink huge sums of money into producing films and as such they strive to profit as much from their productions. In their quest for returns, they often resort to marketing strategies of catering to the lowest common denominator, with content that find favour amongst the audiences. Being driven by ‘box office return’, filmmakers’ efforts converge on catering to the changing taste and demands of the audiences, the very profile of which is changing.

Over the hundred and fifteen years of its reformist journey, Bollywood has mirrored a range of issues prompting public debate and tempting corrective state action. In the course of the long journey, the nature and style of the narratives have changed to an extent where the fantasy-oriented entertainment dimension has emerged as a vital component. Despite its vacillation between the two extremes, of sometimes being awfully responsible and at others outright sensational, Indian cinema has truly attempted to mirror social reality. A gamut of issues got representation in Indian cinema – from freedom to unemployment, from poverty to exploitation, from dowry to women’s emancipation, from social conflict to national integration, from education to fantasy-oriented entertainment. Cinema did make honourable attempts to bring about social awareness amongst the Indians and to remove age-old taboos. The sufferings of peasantry at the hands of the landlords and moneylenders, the unpleasant consequences of widow remarriage, the evils of a young girl’s forced marriage with an old man, the deadly consequences of communal conflicts, the tragic effects of dowry, the sufferings of untouchables and the like have been vividly narrated on the celluloid.

If popular perception is any indicator, a major part of the social transformation in India can be attributed to cinema’s social reformist role. Films that talked movingly about the wrongs of the society perceptibly influenced it and shaped it for the better,
and films that movingly talked about pro-social values and their pleasant consequences could further reinforce such values.

Despite popular perception favouring it, there are differences of views on “whether cinema has social impact?” One school of thought believes that films can never affect or reform the social body or the events taking place within it, but the other believes that the medium does have a direct or indirect impact, though it is not immediately perceptible. The former finds evidence in the notion that ‘just after a couple of excellent anti-war films were exhibited, the second world war engulfed humanity’. They urge that cinema cannot and should not offer any solutions for social problems raised by its writers and directors, by its content and style. The mere exposition of the problem, therefore, is enough and there ends cinema’s artistic obligation. The later, however, stretches cinema’s role further to promote a thought process and a line of action whereby the viewers are provoked into trying a change for the better (Rangoonwalla, 1975).

Elaborating on the impact of cinema on the viewer’s judgement, Rangoonwalla (1975) claims that cinema has grown to be a standard reference for most kinds of questions and situations, where elementary knowledge and practice are needed. The mass mind picks up such points largely and stores them in some mental corner, to be reactivated while seeking or giving answers and guidance in certain situations.

A gloss over the available literature of impact of cinema shows that Cinema can play positive impacts in terms of providing entertainment, enhancing information and knowledge, sensitizing people about urgent issues of society, in creating sociability and offering catharsis. It offers release from tensions of daily life. Cinema can also play an equally negative role in teaching wrong values, generating social and sexual violence and crime, providing escape from reality into a dream world of fantasy instead of facing up to the problems of life, encouraging adoption of destructive role models and in encouraging cynicism about social institutions (Bhakhry, 1995).

The role of women in the Indian society has been a subject of Indian cinema from its very inception. A host of films have discussed issues of women. The film *Achhut Kanya* (1936) protested against the caste barriers and religious bigotry and
suggested inter-caste marriage as a way out. Indian cinema raised the issue of Hindu widow remarriage in *Bal Yogi* (1936); protested against marriage of young girls with old persons in *Duniya Na Mane* (1937); and drew attention on the problems of alcoholism in *Angoori* (1943). The problems of unwed mothers were narrated in film *Devata* (1939); while the malice of dowry was exposed in *Dahej* (1950). *Duniya Na Mane* (1937) was a challenge to the feudal system and a courageous attempt against gender discrimination and child marriage. The film *Prem Rog* (1982) dealt with the social issue of widow remarriage to emerge as a milestone in social film making. The film *Chandni Bar* (2001) narrates lives stories of the Bar girls of Bombay, through the struggle of a girl through her life first during her days as a bar dancer, through her marriage and then eventually as a mother.

The cinematic portrayal of women reflects their social role as mother, as wife, as daughter. They are also portrayed as housewives, as professionals, as business leaders, and as labourers. They are portrayed as single woman, as unwed mothers, and as prostitutes. In the social power structure, women are portrayed as dominant, subordinate, balanced, and as marginalized. True to their social role, in personal attributes, women are shown as optimist, hesitant, fearful. They are portrayed as traditional as well as modern. Onscreen women are all-rounder, spirited, egoistic. They are portrayed as contended as well as over-anxious. In the Indian social structure, women are portrayed as family pillar, self-sacrificing and strong valued. This diversity in role portrayals is expected to be a reflection of social reality if the argument of cinema as a mirror of social reality is accepted. Conversely, if cinema’s impact on society is accepted, then it is also likely that the Indian women emulated their role from the celluloid portrayals.

The critical feminist perspective on media content was mainly concerned with the stereotyping, neglect and marginalization of women that were common during the 1970s. As Rakow (1986) points out, media content can never be a true account of reality, and it is less important to change media representation than to challenge the underlying sexist ideology of much media content.

Most central to the critical feminist analysis is probably the broad question of how texts position the female subject in narratives and textual interactions and in so doing contribute to a definition of femininity in collaboration with the reader. For the
feminist critique, two issues necessarily arise. First, the extent to which commercial, media texts intended for the entertainment of women like soap operas can ever be liberating when they embody the realities of patriarchal society and family institutions (Radway, 1984). Second, the degree to which new kind of mass media texts that challenge gender stereotyping and try to introduce positive role models can have the empowering effect for women (while remaining within the dominant commercial media system). Ultimately, the answers to these questions depend on how the texts are received by the audiences.

A pertinent question that deserves attention is how the cause-effect relationship prevailed. Against the backdrop of the encounters in the available literature, this study explores the portrayal of female protagonists in the popular Hindi cinema in India. Through an analysis of female protagonists in selected popular Hindi cinema, this study explores how the portrayal of the female protagonist has changed over the last fifty years. Another important questions that this study addresses are: Can the women portrayed on screen act as role models for women in society? What are the social issues being raised in the selected films and what solutions have been provided for them? What is the dominant image of womanhood that emerges out of the study of the selected films? In order to answer these questions, feminist film theory has been used as a qualitative tool to analyze the selected female characters and the films.

Chapter 1 has been labelled as Research Design and includes importance of the study, objectives of the study, research questions, review of literature, methodology, theoretical framework: feminist film theory, and the limitations of the study. Chapter 2 provides a brief introduction to the Hindi film industry and its evolution through the past 100 or so years. Chapter 3 deals with the portrayal of woman in Hindi cinema in various roles, such as women as wives, women as mothers and unwed mothers, women as daughters, women as courtesans and prostitutes, and women as rape victims. Chapter 4 is the analysis of the women protagonists in selected films from 1950 to 2000. The work is concluded in chapter 5.

1.2 Importance of the Study

Women’s representation in media texts has long concerned social scientists and scholars. The medium of motion pictures holds a special place across various
media texts due to its immense popularity among audience and the sheer captivating power of the audio-visual. Women and cinema has long been an important subject in social sciences. It raises important questions about film as an art practice, film as a tool to raise social awareness, film as a medium of entertainment and film as an instrument to dispense the dominant ideology. A plethora of research is available in the west that deals with the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in films, advertisements, literature etc. While a body of research that deals with the representation of women in media has begun to appear in India too, much focus and detailed work is still required to unearth the practice of stereotyping and misrepresentation of women. This work is aimed at contributing towards the growing body of literature that deals with women--cinema interface in India. Due to the diversity of themes in popular Hindi cinema, sheer number of films produce till date and the popularity that the genre commands, it is important to investigate the roles of women in such films. This research will help in understanding the popular image of women as showcased in the films.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

One of the first objectives of this study is to understand the portrayal of women in selected Hindi films. The portrayal will be understood in terms of the defining characteristics of women depicted on the screen. This objective can be further refined as: to explore the characterization of women in the selected Hindi films. Since this study covers a time period of fifty years, it is imperative to understand the evolution of female protagonists in the selected films. The evolution can be ascertained in terms of the change in the portrayal of women on screen from 1950 to 2000. Sexual objectification of women across media texts and specifically in films has long been a concern for feminist scholars. Therefore, this study will also look at the objectification of women. The influence of films as a powerful communication medium that can influence and modulate behaviour cannot be underestimated. Another objective of this study is: to understand the women depicted in the selected films as role models for women in society. Literature, art, paintings etc. have all tried to define womanhood in their own terms. They have endeavoured to frame the feminine in distinctive moulds. Cinema too plays its part in defining womanhood for the society. Another objective of this work is: to understand the dominant image of womanhood that can be gleaned from the study of selected films.
Films have long played the role of entertainers and carriers of social messages. Therefore, the role of selected films in highlighting the social issues and providing a solution for them will also be a focus in this study.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1. What are the defining characteristics of female protagonists in selected Hindi films?

RQ2. Has the portrayal of women protagonists changed from 1950 to 2000?

RQ3. Have the women protagonists in the films sexually objectified?

RQ4. Can the women protagonists act as role models for women in society?

RQ5. What is the dominant image of Indian womanhood, that is depicted in the films?

RQ6. Which social issues were raised in the films, and what was the solution provided for them?

1.5 Review of Literature

The film--feminism interface did not establish itself in the west until the 1970s. Consequentially, studies dealing with the topic in Indian context were even slower to start in India and are fewer in number. Film studies in India as an academic discipline itself did not establish before the 1980, with Kumar Shahni, a student of Ritwik Ghatak, being credited with bringing the “first major shift in the ‘national modernist’ writing of Indian film industry” (Rajadhyaksha, 2009; Prasad, 1998).

Chatterji’s (1998) Subject Cinema, Object: Woman, A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema is one of the first comprehensive works of the application of feminist film theory on Hindi cinema. The study deals with a large number of Hindi films ranging from the earliest days of cinema to the late 1990s, and the analysis of their women characters employing the feminist film theory. The detailed analysis draws following conclusions by and large, Indian mainstream cinema reaffirms and reinforces social definitions of women...women are constantly defined in relation to men. Men, masculinity and male behavior are always the reference point for women. Women are defined in familial terms as carers and nurtures. Women’s identity and status derive
from their relation to the explicit gendered categories of mother, daughters, and wives…women are defined not only in relation to men, but also as dependent on men and subordinate to them. (p. 262)

Discussing the Hindi filmmaker’s penchant to evoke the mythical goddesses to create an idolized image of woman on the screen, Chatterji (1998) writes that the women in cinema “must remain trapped within the image of a Sita and capture the symbols associated with Durga, or a Radha”. The conclusion from the chapter dealing with the relation between mythological symbol and women on screen states that “the misuse and abuse of mythological women in and through popular Indian cinema has its own inherent dangers of perpetuating the same myths and spreading the same messages today’s aware women are trying to fight against”. Mathur (2002) explains the figure of mother goddesses that inhabit the Hindi film screen, “the goddess image, however is represented through cardboard representations -- either as a tyrant figure (of a mother-in-law) or as a sacrificing mother, or even as the bloodthirsty Kali”.

Chatterji’s (1998) work further analyses the roles given to women on screen, particularly the image of the woman as a wife, as a mother and as a prostitute. She also investigates women as rape victims and uses Mulvey’s (1989) male gaze to understand the sexual objectification in such films. The study also deals with the portrayal of women in films where the women take male mannerisms and attires, for instance Hunterwali (1935), Bandit Queen (1994) etc. These films, according to Chatterji (1998), “uphold the superiority of men over women and thereby, reinforces and respects patriarchy”, consequentially they give the impression that male are superior beings on earth.

Jain and Rai’s (2002) edited volume Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema is a collection of essays dealing with the feminist interpretations of specific films and noted Indian auteurs such as Rituparno Ghosh and Deepa Mehta. Studying the item numbers in Bollywood, Nair (2002) explains Mulvey’s (1989) male gaze in a short study: “women’s specially constituted role as spectacle, as the subject of the Look, is especially evident in the song and dance numbers”. Items numbers that are usually about blatant display of sexuality have been taken over by the heroines from the vamps of the earlier films. Writing about the portrayal of women in selected
parallel films [Arth (1982), Mrityudand (1997), Aastha (1997) and Paroma (1984)], Sharma (2002) concluded that “these films make a very strong statement about a woman’s perceptions regarding her body and herself, juxtaposed with a man’s perception about herself”. Jain (2002) writes that even “in films with strong feminist statements, the images are cast on stereotypical molds” and woman on screen “continue to live up to the ideal of ‘Sitahood’, men fail to come up with an appropriate concept of masculinity…the Ramayana motif is a recurring one in Hindi cinema.”

Basu (2013) tries to locate femininity in the Hindi film, “in the classical Hindi film, the physicality of the woman cannot threaten or overwhelm a pristine economy of the Hindu-normative household. The woman as mere body is usually displaced into an isomorphic “other” zone with its own grounded typologies.” Basu (2013) further tries to locate the space occupied by women on screen, “the woman was perpetually caught between a desired iconic stasis in the ritualized domesticity of the “home” (the cradle, the kitchen, the tulsi tree in the courtyard, the puja room, or rituals like the Karva Chauth”.

According to Dasgupta (1996) feminists and social scientists have long been concerned with the depiction of women in Hindi ‘masala’ films. Dasgupta (1996) in a study of 16 women centric films produced between 1979 and 1987 with “overt feminist themes”, tries to locate feminist consciousness in the selected films. The author defines feminist consciousness as, “an awareness of women as victims of social oppression in the patriarchal world order, and an integration of the complexities of race, class, sexuality, and culture into this awareness. The study concludes that the films “manifest a strong class bias regarding the types of subjugation and victimization women suffer in society”, lower class women, according to the study are punished more brutally than their upper class counterparts. In these films though women revolt against the patriarchal system, “their victories are ultimately rendered pyrrhic as they are forced to give in to the anguish of a lonely and discontented life”. In the selected films where women revolt against their spouses, “they are either forced to accept their husbands’ terms for reconciliation or are relentlessly destroyed by the social juggernaut”. Dasgupta’s (1996) final conclusion is that the “film industry is producing some films that are dealing with certain issues and
concerns of women. However, the films remain limited in their scope of exploration of gender inequalities”.

Butalia (1984) tries to answer the question as to what kinds of role do women play on screen and whether they serve as role models for Indian women. The author blames the overwhelming presence of men in the film industry to project women as dutiful mothers, loyal sisters and obedient wives. These women act as a support for their men, they provide comfort and rarely question their men. Their self-sacrificing nature and ‘pureness’ is projected as their strength. Modernity as equated with ‘badness’, a ‘bad woman’ is often single and is projected as modern. Modernity is defined in terms of the clothes they wear, and the vices they suffer from, such as smoking and drinking. Butalia predicted in 1984 that change will be slow to come in the projection of images of women in commercial cinema, and the real change won’t come unless women themselves won’t venture in filmmaking. Traditionally the bad women have been symbolized by the ‘vamp’, Mazumdar (2007), describes the vamp as an intrusion of the west into the Indian cinematic space. The vamp suffers from vices and an uninhibited sexuality, “while the heroine was the site of virtue and ‘Indianness’, the vamp’s body suggested excess, out-of-control desire, and vices induced by ‘Western’ license”. This dichotomy of the chaste women and the sexualized vamp continued to pervade Hindi cinema until the early 1980s. During the 1990s, however the hyper sexualized dance sequences associated with the vamp began to be performed by the heroines. In a study spanning from 1991 to 2010, Chatterji (2007) traces the evolution of women’s sexuality in selected Hindi films. The writer opines that the films that show feminine sexuality, do so by attaching negative implications and usually such women have to face a punitive end. Good women who desire are placed within the confines of a marriage.

In a 1987 study, Kishwar and Vanita assert that female characters are stripped of all realistic human and social complexities, and end up on screen as stereotypes. The short study focuses on the representation of women in Hindi films in general and working women in particular. Films, according to the authors have a tendency to stereotype the poor working woman and any realistic portrayal of women is avoided. Women are sentimentalized as victims devoid of any rebellion and competitiveness, she may be a mother of sons, widow or an abandoned wife. The employed woman or the working woman is viewed with ambivalence, and the hostility directed against her
is masked as pity, such women are marked as ‘freaks’ and must be ‘cured’ of their unfeminine desires. The mothers who spend their life in rearing children receive reverence, “the younger woman who starts off as a humble servant, dancing girl or labourer and works her way into the hero’s heart by her selfless service may end up as his wife or may end up dead” (Kishwar & Vanita, 1987). The authors of the study conclude,

until Hindi cinema matures to the extent of acknowledging the complexity and diversity of human nature and experience, and overcomes the temptation to fall back on the small range of stereotypes that it has established for itself, there is little hope that the experience of poor working women will receive less cavalier treatment than it has hitherto. (para, 107)

Ram (2002) in an ethnographic study conducted on Indian diaspora tries to understand the audience’s understanding of the representation of gender in popular Hindi cinema. The author writes that, “commercial Indian cinema has clearly been a masculine domain which inevitably promoted women as star objects instead of star subjects” (Ram, 2002). Women are declared stars based on their ability to cater to male desire and fantasy, men become stars because of their ability to represent allegorically aspects of the self, such as the image of the ‘angry-young man’ personified by Amitabh Bachchan. Women, according to the study are perpetually implicated in discourses of nationhood resulting in gendered nationalist scripts that emerge across film texts and reader’s narratives.

According to Sen (2008), the female protagonist remains a figure of suffering and abjection, especially in the post-independence India. She is a victim, invariably rescued by the intervention of a reform minded and progressive male. Kakar (1981) defines the ‘good mother’ in Hindi cinema, and attributes suffering as the most important feature of mothers in films. Sons, invariably are the saviors of such mothers. Sen (2008) talks about the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema’s golden age; “the basic ideological scaffolding of popular cinema remained undeniably masculinist, in tandem with the larger national discourses of independent nationhood” (Sen, 2008). Bollywood, according to the author has also used the overused formula of a dangerously alluring femme fatale who threatens the happy conjugal home, this
melodramatic plot has produced many hit films. Post-liberalization Hindi cinema continued to define and denounce ‘unacceptable’ femininities and rogue sexualities and these films were commercial success.

Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1980, cited in Banaji, 2006) maintain that Hindi films deploy female characters who are psychologically paradoxical, they actually depict the absolute male worshipping devotion of women from Hindu epics, blended with the nonchalant use of costumes and tough behaviour supposedly attributed to ‘liberated’ Western women. The films try to create an image of a woman idolized in the religious epics and simultaneously try to create another contrasting image of a woman supposed to be modern and liberated. According to Nandy (1981) Hindi films try to depict the traditional Indian’s fragmented image of a woman, which is more blatantly represented by the characterization of the ‘bad’ women on the screen, “such women are represented by cantankerous mothers-in-law and arrogant caste-conscious wives of the rich, on the one hand, and by seductive cabaret dancers and gunmen’s molls, on the other”. These women, according to Nandy (1981) are “placed outside the acceptable limits of bi-cultural living”.

Ayob’s (2008) study tries to locate the change in women’s characters in six popular Hindi films ranging from 1970 to 2007. The study posits that women characters in the 1970s and 1980s were portrayed as docile and “unable to articulate their needs even in the face of oppression, or as independent but cruel or hard-hearted; more specifically, women characters were portrayed as preservers of tradition.” According to this study the 1980s mark the beginning of “a shift in the psyche of women characters” (Ayob, 2008), who wanted to break free from their environments. Women characters in Pakeezah (1971), Umrao Jan (1982) and Prem Rog (1982) are portrayed as preservers of traditions while women in Salam Namaste (2005), Baabul (2006), and Tara Ra Rum Pum (2007) have been characterized as the ‘new Indian women’ who want to break free from the shackles.

Sarkar (2012) analyses women centric films in parallel cinema and middle cinema, whereas parallel cinema has been identified as serious and artistic in representation and middle cinema as a cross between commercial and commercial and parallel. The study mainly suggested that “representation of women in such films encourages social change in the treatment of women in Indian society” (Sarkar,
Like many other works that hinted at the construction of a woman character with mythological underpinnings, Sarkar’s (2012) work also drew the same conclusion. Goddesses such as Durga and Kali were evoked by the filmmakers in women characters who fought men.

Pradhan (2014) explains the portrayal of women in selected films via a comparative study of Bollywood songs and concludes that “women in popular cinema today are objects with predetermined roles first and then anything else”, and even modern liberated women in Bollywood blockbusters such as Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham (2001) and Lagaan Chunari Mein Daag (2007), are “patriarchal in totality of their conception of woman and womanhood” (Pradhan, 2014).

Another area of concern of Feminist scholars in India is that popular films in India portray women in stereotypical roles, where they accept sexual violence without complaining (Dasgupta & Hegde, 1988; Gandhi & Shah, 1992). In other words, violence against women may be shown as a normal part of a man–woman relationship. Derné (1995) suggests that the abuse of women at the hand of men has been glorified by Indian cinema. Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2007) conducted a study to investigate the manner in which popular Hindi films portray sexual violence, and the way in which violence might be associated with gender and romantic love. Top box office hits from 1997, 1998 and 1999 were taken for analysis. The research concluded that slightly half of the sexual scenes depicted in the films contained sexual violence in the form of teasing. The study also concluded that women were more likely to be the victim of sexual violence than men, and that “severe sexual violence is more likely to be portrayed as serious, whereas moderate sexual violence is more likely to be portrayed as fun” (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). Even in the films meant for all age groups, sexual violence is present and apart from villains the obvious perpetrators of sexual violence in Hindi cinema, heroes too are responsible for violence against women on screen. While villains were responsible for serious sexual crimes, heroes were implicated in moderate crimes such as teasing and harassment.

Somaaya, Kothari, and Madangarli (2002) in Mother Maiden Mistresses study the depiction of women in Hindi cinema from 1950 to 2000. The authors mention the impact of the feminine imagined in religious texts such as Manusmriti to be more
prominent in the 1950s. The female characters during this time were influenced from religious parables and the various female characters from myths and epics such as Sita, Shakuntala, and Radha. Though the stamp of the female from epics never faded, it was strong during the beginning years of Hindi cinema. During the sixties, the ideology and the imagination that defined the women characters of the previous decade continued, though it was a bit watered down. Women in films during this time, because of the prominence of the romantic musicals, were readily portrayed as sweethearts and love interests. The figure of the courtesan, which was to make its mark in the coming decades, also entered during this era. The seventies, according to the characters discussed in the study, marked the first time when women began to break away from the past definitions. They tried to defy the notions of purity, sacrifice and duty that were considered as hallmarks of women in Hindi cinema. The eighties continued the tradition of previous decades and women characters tried to cross the laxman-rekha more often. Stereotyping dominated the women characters of the nineties according to Somaaya et al. (2012), though there were women on screen who were ready to break the shackles.

Bose (2009) writes that “portrayal of Indian women in Bollywood films creates, produces, and reinforces women’s roles in a strictly heterosexual and rigid fashion”. Further, Bose (2009) questions the ‘progress’ made by Bollywood in recent years with reference to increasing ‘westernization’ and ‘marketization’ in Hindi cinema and asserts that “things haven’t changed much for Indian women”.

Abbasi-Bhura (2001) investigated the role of women in selected popular cinema using feminist film theory. Mother India (1957), Sholay (1975), and Hum Aapke Hain Koun..! (1994) were critiqued to unearth the roles assigned to women characters. The work asserts that

the two main characters found on celluloid are that of wife and mother. These two characterizations have their roots in two great Indian mythologies, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. There are strong links between onscreen women and the goddesses Sita, Durga, and Kali. Other roles women are cast in are that of vamp, courtesan, and avenger. (Abbasi-Bhura, 2001, p. v)
Abbasi-Bhura (2001) also identifies the common themes related to women in the selected films, which included self-sacrifice, taming of women through force, use of women as erotic spectacle and domestication of women. The work further asserts that “the roles of women in Indian popular cinema has not changed in the last fifty years” (Abbasi-Bhura, 2001). Even westernized and glamorous women are expected to be conservative, domesticated and subservient.

Nandakumar (2001) studied the role of women in Indian cinema in a time period spanning 60 years. Women, according to the study, were playing roles that were subservient to the male lead and stereotypical in nature. Nandakumar (2001) also defines the fundamental roles of women in cinema – “the subservient wife, mother or sister, the vamp and the prostitute, the very sensuous girlfriend who is very conforming”. The roles played by women ultimately catered to the image of women in the male fantasy. Women on screen are caught between the image of a saintly Madonna or the debased prostitutes and the images of women on screen cater to the patriarchal fantasy of what a woman should be. Mythical characters like Sita, Radha, Draupadi and Savitri are used as prototypes for women characters. Datta (2000) investigates the relationship between globalization and the representation of women in Indian cinema and writes that “fundamentalist forces at home erase spaces of difference and possible interventions and construct a monolithic representation of gender and nation”. Datta (2000) also blames the emergent right-wing ideology for the stereotyping of women roles. The Madonna versus the prostitute motif is also indicated in Akbar’s (1992) study that mentions the depiction of heroines in Hindi cinema. Heroines in earlier films, according to the study, symbolized chastity and virtue, her beauty evoked literary responses and comparison with moon and stars. Akbar (1992) hints at the male gaze and blames the camera for robbing the heroines of their dignity in the films of 80s, with the camera more focused on the bodies than the ‘doe-liked’ eyes of earlier heroines.

Virdi (2003) talking about contemporary Hindi films, blames a nationalist patriarchy and a sexist film industry for the portrayal of women in films. Virdi further mentions a network of institutions that frame ‘womanhood’ in popular imagination. This Indian ‘womanhood’ was created during the nineteenth century in response to the colonial rule. Art, literature, drama, poetry and other art forms created an image of
a woman that was actually a mix of upper-class Brahminical values and Victorian values.

While much of the research on the roles and images of women on screen focus on women as wives and mothers, Rajjiva (2010) examines cinematic images of gender in terms of the father/daughter dynamic in four films depicting the South Asian diaspora: Bend it like Beckham (2002), Monsoon Wedding (2001), Bollywood/Hollywood (2002) and Second Generation (2003). Calling the films as texts of resistance, Rajjiva (2010) suggests that the films depict the “post-patriarchal family: where the father is no longer a God-like figure of omnipotent power but, instead, a space of nurturing and even empathy”.

Commenting on Jab We Met (2007) and 3 Idiots (2009), both of them super-hits, Gupta (2010) is of the opinion that the films have serious problems with gender and the films use “women’s sexual vulnerability to create sensation and humour”. While Jab We Met uses English language and metaphors to create humour, 3 Idiots is crude in its directness. Punathambekar (2013) calls the women characters as the primary custodians of Indian culture in films that feature the Indian diaspora, such as Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001). Moreover, such films make a synecdochic relationship between the purity of the women and the purity and sanctity of the nation. In a critique of Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak (1988), Sircar (1999) maintains that the love story in Bombay cinema changed after the 1980s and coincided with the liberalization. This resulted in the change of the ‘Indian woman’ on screen, who was related to the “whole spate of features asserting the continuity of traditional institutions in the new time”. Writing in 1991, Tejaswini Niranjana relates the rising nationalism and the image of women on screen and avers that “the aggressive neo-nationalism of our times produces and sanctions a new femininity which is targeted by a national market rather than merely regional ones” (Niranjana, 1991).

While most of the research identifies the problem with the depiction of women characters, Tere (2012) suggests a solution to the issue

[W]omen characters should possess agency to dismantle the existing power structures as well as be able to negotiate their own position within this structure. It is time that cinema seeks a redefinition of women as objects of male gaze Women’ s
experiences and dilemmas as points of narration are the need of the hour. Going beyond the stereotypes will do a great help to the cause of women in Indian society. (p. 9)

1.6 Methodology

This study deals with the application of feminist film theory on selected films, to study the female protagonists of Bollywood or popular Hindi cinema. Films belonging to the category of popular cinema have been taken for analysis. Popular Hindi cinema is distinctive from its counterpart, that is the art film or the parallel film. Ganti (2004) defines the characteristics of popular cinema as films that feature songs and dance, melodrama, put emphasis on stars and spectacles and have lavish production values. Moreover, the popular cinema in Hindi has a distinctive narrative structure and may follow a given set of plot devices. In other words, it may not be difficult for the audience to predict the end or the climax of the movie. Nandy (1981) clearly distinguishes between the popular cinema and the art cinema: “the Bombay cinema is a spectacle not an artistic endeavor”. Popular cinema can also be distinguished from the art film in terms of the sheer number of audience that the former commands. This factor is important because it tells us about what the audience likes and what the filmmakers think will be liked by the audience.

The word protagonist is of Greek origin and made up of two words: protos meaning first and agonizesthai meaning to fight. The word owed its origin to the Greek theatre and refers to the actor playing the leading role (Pavis & Shantz, 1998). Due to the distinctive character of Hindi cinema, popular Hindi films would have at least two protagonists, that is a male protagonist called as hero, and the female protagonist called the heroine. For the purpose of this study, the female protagonist has been defined as the female character who plays an important role on the development of the plot or has bearing on the narrative structure of the film.

Due the prolific nature of the Hindi film industry and the sheer diversity in terms of stories and plot, every year hundreds of films are produced in Bollywood with varied themes. In order to choose the most appropriate films for the study, the following criteria were applied
a) Commercial success: the amount of money a film makes has long been a method to gauge its popularity and indicates the acceptance of the film by the audience.

b) The strength of the female protagonist: Hindi cinema has traditionally been male centric (Chatterji, 1998; Ganti, 2004; Gulzar, Nihalani, & Chatterjee, 2003; Patel, 1998). It is the male characters or the heroes that are the centre of all action from a narrative and dramatic point of view. The heroes decide, take action and act. It is around the heroes that the story is weaved. Therefore, it was imperative to choose films that had female protagonists with meaningful roles. Films with female characters that had a strong role to play in the plot of the films, or films, where the female character’s role in the narrative structure of the film was strong, were required for this study.

Considering the above-mentioned criteria, purposive sampling was employed to select films.

The time period covered in this study is 50 years. The entire time span has been divided into five decades, the first being 1950-1960, followed by 1960-1970, 1970-1980, 1980-1990 and 1990-2000. From each decade, two representative films were chosen. These are:

**1950—1960**
1) *Mr. & Mrs. 55* (1955)
2) *Mother India* (1957)

**1960—1970**
3) *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam* (1962)
4) *Guide* (1965)

**1970—1980**
5) *Abhimaan* (1972)
6) *Julie* (1975)

**1980—1990**
1990–2000

9)  *Damini* (1993)

10)  *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999)

From each of the selected film, the female protagonist was analysed employing the feminist film theory. The following protagonists were studied: Anita from *Mr. & Mrs. 55* (1955), Radha from *Mother India* (1957), Chhoti Bahu from *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam* (1962), Rosie from *Guide* (1965), Uma from *Abhimaan* (1972), Julie from *Julie* (1975), Manorama from *Prem Rog* (1982), Kiran from *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988), Damini from *Damini* (1993) and Nandini from *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999).

Feminist film theory is a diverse and multifaceted discipline. According to Branigan and Buckland (2014), three distinctive methodologies can be traced in feminist film theory. These are: representation, production and spectatorship. The method of representation asks how the women have been represented on screen. And what is the relationship between the gender depictions on screen and in real life. Production as a methodology asks questions about a feminist-counter cinema. How will feminist-counter cinema fit in the mainstream Hollywood and what are feminist films and feminist directors? Moreover, the methodology of production also concerns itself with the aiding and the documenting of women’s filmmaking. The exclusive film festivals in US and UK during the 1970s, where work by women directors were shown is an example of this kind of method. Study of the psyche and study of the body constitute the spectatorship mode of analysis. Spectatorship as a methodology asks questions about the masculine and the feminine images on screen and about the manner in which women’s images are received. The identification of the images of women on screen can be used to raise consciousness amongst women about the manner in which patriarchy is expressed and maintained on the screen.

This study primarily uses the representation mode of analysis for studying the popular Hindi films. This type of analysis is sociological in nature and relies on the works of American scholars Rosen (1973), Haskel (1974) and others. More or less, the entire gamut of work that dealt with the representation as a methodology is western in nature. The women characters were studied with reference to western culture and values. Moreover, the analysts themselves were American or European and interpreted the films according to their own understanding. For the purpose of
this study, since popular Hindi films are being studied, a distinctive Indian framework is necessary. Chatterji’s (1998) interpretation of the feminist film theory with reference to Indian culture and history will be a reference point for this work. Chatterji (1998) distinguished between feminism as a methodology and feminism as a perspective. While the two are independent of each other, there are conceptual differences between the two. According to Chatterji (1998), feminism “offers more of a perspective than a methodology. It is more like a pair of spectacles through which one can look at films”. Women’s portrayal can be studied through ‘presences’ and ‘absences’. Presences include explicit ways in which women are portrayed in film in extreme polarities such as good/bad, black/white, mother/whore etc. Presences also include the kind of images bestowed on women such as the ‘sati savitri’ or the ‘glamourized’ western woman. ‘Absences’ imply the manner in which woman characters do not appear at all in films. One of the methods of feminist film theory is to draw attention towards things that often go unnoticed in the films. A feminist analysis of films is strongly connected to the portrayal of female characters in terms of stereotypes. Stereotypes in cinema has long been a concern for film critics. As early as in 1934, Panofsky (1975) raised the question of stereotypes in cinema. In Film and Stereotype: A Challenge for Cinema and Theory, Schweinitz (2001) writes that stereotypes in the form of fixed schemata can be observed in the worlds of narrative and they have been automatized and conventionalized. The author further asserts that stereotypes have become so ubiquitous that “the idea of creating films untouched by such factors seems truly anachronistic”. Therefore, this study will also focus on the stereotyping of women. In order to expose and understand the sexual objectification of selected women protagonists in this study, spectatorship mode of analysis will be used. Specifically, Mulvey’s (1989) concept of male gaze will be utilized to unmask the sexual objectification of women characters.

1.7 Theoretical Framework: Feminist Film Theory

As early as 1934, Panofsky questioned the primitive stereotyping that existed in early Hollywood films. While the questioning included both men and women, Panofsky mentions the ‘straight girl’ and the ‘vamp’ images of women that existed on the screen. Panofsky’s essay Style Medium and Motion Pictures was called the “most important statement on film aesthetics” (Talbot, 1975). A simple explanation was offered to explain the stereotyping: the audience’s aesthetics were not well developed
during the early days of cinema and their understanding of film as a medium of communication too was limited. Hence, the images on screen had to be simple, so that the audience could readily understand the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ characters.

Feminist film theory has been traditionally divided into two school of thoughts: the sociological approach, introduced by American scholars Rosen (1973) and Haskel (1974), who attempted to study the representation of women on screen; and the theoretical approach by film theoreticians from England who employed an array of disciplines to formulate feminist film theory. These disciplines include critical theory, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxism. Laura Mulvey who deployed psychoanalysis to understand spectatorship is a good example of the British theoretical approach.

The 1970s can be called as the definitive decade for feminist film criticism. Molly Haskel’s *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974), Marjorie Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus* (1973) and Joan Mellen’s *Women and their Sexuality in The New Films* (1973) were all published in this decade. In 1975, the arrival of Laura Mulvey’s influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* was witnessed, which took the world of feminist film criticism by storm. These works broke new ground and opened up previously ignored aspects of film criticism (Kaplan, 1974). The formulation of a feminist film theory in this decade strongly influenced film-studies itself. Its effect could be discerned in filmmaking also, with many avant-garde filmmakers linking theory to practice (Chaudhuri, 2006).

During the ensuing decades, feminist film theory continued to evolve. Silverman (1980), Creed (1987) and de Lauretis (1984) were important contributors to the growing repository of knowledge. Silverman in her book *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) takes the feminist film critique to a new dimension and introduces the concept of the role of voice. Silverman argues “that classic cinema is obsessed with the sounds produced by the female voice. Women’s voices are invariably tied to bodily spectacle, presented as ‘thick with body’ – for example, crying, panting, or screaming” (Silverman, 1988 cited in Chaudhuri 2006). Silverman’s basic argument was that the feminist film criticism was too obsessed with the image track and the soundtrack too needs to be analyzed, and that sexual differences can be created by using the soundtrack. Creed’s (1993) book *The Monstrous Feminine* uses
psychoanalysis to understand the construction of the woman-monster in the horror film genre. Creed cites from epics and myths across various cultures and religions, such as the Medusa with the deadly gaze from Greek mythology, the mythical sirens who lure sailors to their destruction and the Hindu goddess Kali, these mythical feminine figures form the basis for the construction of the female monsters in popular horror films. The Technology of Gender by de Lauretis (1987) is considered as a landmark essay in the field. This essay applies radical thinking to the concept of sexual difference as understood and explained in feminism. The author criticizes the male bias of scholars such as Michael Foucault and asserts that psychoanalysis was unable to explain the relationship between women as historically specific individuals and women as defined in cultural representations.

Haskel (1974) was one of the first scholars to analyze the image of women on screen in detail. A time period of 50 years was covered in the book, which defined three kinds of women characters in Hollywood films. First is the extraordinary woman played by actresses such as Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis, these women are strong and powerful figures. Second type of woman to appear on screen are the ordinary woman who were common, passive and often a victim of circumstances, they were the precursors of the soap operas. And the third category was the ordinary women who became extraordinary, these were the victims who endure trials and rise to become powerful figures. Haskel like her Indian counterparts in the later decades, identified the most important themes of films that portrayed a woman character; sacrifice. A woman must sacrifice herself for her children, she must sacrifice her lover for marriage, her career for love and love for career. Sacrifice was the defining aspect of women on screen. Haskel (1974) summarized her work as

Here we are today, with an unparalleled freedom of expression, and a record number of women performing, achieving, choosing to fulfill themselves, and we are insulted with the worst--the most abused, neglected, and dehumanized--screen heroines in film history. (p. 30)

The study further categorized heroines as “whores, quasi-whores, jilted mistresses, emotional cripples, drunks, Daffy ingénues, Lolitas, kooks, sex-starved spinsters, psychotics. Icebergs, zombies, castrators”. The works by Haskel, Mellen and Rosen
assume a relation between film and society that is cemented by the idea of ‘ideology’. This school of thought has accused films of producing a false consciousness, in these films there is a discrepancy between the women on screen and women in reality. “Films do not show 'real' women but only the stereotypical images of an ideologically laden 'femininity’” (Smelik, 1998). Female audience do not have role models on screens but can only take refuge in the fantasy offered by the stereotypes.

Other works in later decades such as Annette Kuhn’s Women’s Pictures (1982), E. Ann Kaplan’s Women and Films-Both Sides of the Camera (1983) further established feminist film criticism as an academic discipline. Kuhn (1994) questions the stereotypical images of women that are offered on the screen, according to the study, construction of a female ideal that is beautiful, shapely, young, glamorous and fashionable may be considered as oppressive, because it holds an incorrect image for women to look up to. In other words, women may look up to an artificial image created by the male filmmakers that would be impossible to follow and emulate. While the feminist film theory was by scholars, journals such as the American ‘Camera Obscura’ and the British ‘Screen’ became an active and diverse repository of literature and knowledge on feminist-film interface.

Rosen (1973) writes about the discrepancy between the images of women on the screen and the reality of their lives off screen. According to Rosen while women were shown succeeding through wit in a series of comedies and gutsy dramas where they played diverse roles from detectives to spies and from editors to secretaries; in reality this was a “distortion of the truth of women’s social role. In the name of escapism, films were guilty of extravagant misrepresentations, exuding a sense of well-being to the nation in general and women in particular. In fact, precisely the opposite was true” (Rosen, 1973 cited in Kaplan 1974).

Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, originally published in the influential film journal Screen, introduced psychoanalysis into film criticism and launched a new and diverse method of investigating films. Psychoanalysis was not always a favourite of feminist film critics. During the 1960s, feminists considered psychoanalysis as their enemy. However, many scholars argued that a misreading and misinterpretation of Freud is the reason behind the disinterest in psychoanalysis. In Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Julit Mitchell re-read Freud
through the works of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and reintroduced psychoanalysis in the feminist mainstream (Chaudhuri, 2006). Mulvey employs psychoanalysis as a ‘political weapon’ in film criticism with dexterity and explains how the subconscious of a patriarchal mind-set fashions our film watching experience. Mulvey also makes the assertion that men and women are differently positioned by the camera. According to Mulvey, Hollywood films use females to provide a pleasurable visual experience for men. While the women are the subject of the narrative gaze, men are the sources of gaze. She coined the term ‘male gaze’ to explain the male’s point of view towards the female in cinema. This point of view is sexually coloured and reduces women as objects that are to be viewed for Scopophilia. Scopophilia is a Freudian term that refers to the pleasures that one gets in watching others. Male gaze itself is of three types: (a) that of the person behind the camera or the camera’s point of view, (b) that of the characters within the film, that is the point of view of the male characters in the film and (c) that of the spectator – the audience or the spectator is also a participant in the gaze, and along with the characters dissect the women on the screen with his gaze. The oft-quoted “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger, 1972) from John Berger’s essay on the European nude paintings applies aptly to the concept of male gaze. The western art and aesthetics had already canonized a visual mechanism, where male looks and the female is looked at or the female is presented in a manner, which is pleasurable to look at. Cinema being a product of male-dominated industry appropriated this visual mechanism and transplanted it on the screen. What resulted was a passive female and an active male. It is around the active and powerful male that the drama and action happens and the male look comes into action. Mulvey’s work on spectatorship and psychoanalysis has been referred as the “founding document of feminist film theory” (Modleski, 1989).

Claire Johnston rejected the sociological approach and became one of the first scholars to use the semiotic sign system to study the women on screen. The female on cinema, as explained by Johnston (Johnston, 1973; cited in Thornham, 1999), is a structure or a code. The presence of womanly characters is explained as the absence of male ones. In other words, women are a ‘not-man’ not a ‘woman-as-woman’. Moreover, Johnston further opines that the realistic nature of modern cinema makes the imaginary women characters more real. Women on screen thus are imaginations
of man. They are expressed in terms of a male understanding of the feminine, and due to the powerful and realistic mode of communication that cinema is, these women on screen are interpreted as real by the audience, both men and women. In a male-dominated industry that is pervaded with sexist ideology, a woman is represented as what she represents for a man. In simpler words, the woman on screen is actually a man’s woman not a woman’s woman. Johnston’s suggestion is not to separate the film as a political tool and film as entertainment. Ideas from the entertainment film should drive the political film.

1.8 Limitations of the study

The study does not include parallel cinema, where woman have been provided with better and realistic roles. Since Hindi film industry produces hundreds of films each year with multiple ‘blockbusters’, the selection of films was a problematic area. In a single decade, diverse roles have been provided to women, so it was difficult to select appropriate films. Some films were critically acclaimed but were box office flops; hence, they were not included in the study. Though the researcher has used the qualitative framework provided by the feminist film theory, the study can be deemed subjective and open to interpretation.