3.1 Women as Wives

Hindi cinema has an age-old obsession with the institution of marriage. This reflects a lot from the social milieu from where marriage has sprung. Similar to the Indian society traditionally preoccupied with marriage, cinema too has shown marriage and the related stories with great splendour and pomp. While the wife of Hindi cinema has changed dramatically over the years, from being a submissive and dependent character to become an independent woman, the set portrayals of wives have not changed.

If there is one word that appropriately defines the wives of Hindi films, it is ‘dutiful’. Even in films where the woman gets a strong role, for example in Mother India (1957), the wife is absolutely devoted to her family. Radha played by Nargis plays the role of a perfect wife in this film. She massages her husband’s feet when he returns from the fields and painstakingly manages her children and sacrifices a lot to nurture them. Chatterji (1998) writes that the role of wife has undergone changes but has basically remained the same. She is being passive, submissive and one dimensional. Whether it is Gumasta (1951), or a comparatively new age film like Ramesh Sippy’s Shakti (1981) or even Mashaal (1984) and Hum Aapka Hain Kaun (1994) or, Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaenge (1995), the wife is shown as obeying the husband even if she feels differently about something. (p. 64)

Wives of Hindi cinema seldom take decisions on their own and are often told by their husbands not to think. They must be deferential to their husbands all the time. This constant giving of respect is not only confined to their husbands but to other senior ‘male’ members of the household as well, especially towards the father-in-law.

Always dressed in traditional attire and sporting the Indian symbol of marriagehood – the vermillion – the roles of wives have been constructed as a repository of Indian culture. Indian culture puts great emphasis on women, especially wives, and expects a lot from them not only in terms of attire but also in terms of general demeanour and behaviour. Hindi cinema goes out of the way to portray the wives as characterized by this culture. In fact, before the marriage when it comes to
fixing the marriage, the women’s consent is usually never shown by a simple yes or no. An oft-repeated scene in many Hindi films is whenever the father discusses the marriage proposal with the daughter she coyly runs to her room. This behaviour is interpreted as a yes, reiterating the patriarchal belief that women’s consent is not important and all important decisions must be taken by men.

Chatterji (1998) writes that “As wife, within mainstream cinema, the woman has been victim of every imaginable kind of suppression, oppression, subordination and humiliation.” A long-standing complaint of feminist film critics is that irrespective of the role given to woman, whether that of a wife or a lover or a daughter, she is always portrayed as an attachment or as a side-kick to the male protagonist. This appears even truer when it comes to wives. The wife prepares meals for the husband, nurtures the children, provides sexual gratification to him and often plays the role of the weak link in hero’s life, that is when the villain kidnaps or threatens her, the male protagonist or the hero must rescue her in a dramatic action scene. The wife is nothing but a satellite to her protagonist husband, and her life and work revolves around the male protagonist. She provides comfort to him when he returns to home after work, provides succour and support to the husband whenever he is in some problem.

The tradition of Sati, which was popular in some parts of India, attracted a lot of cinematic attention before independence. Many films were made on the subject, such as Sati Parvati (1920), Sati Anusuya (1933), Saubhagya Lakshmi (1934). The tradition of glorifying Sati – an ancient Hindu concept in which the wife commits herself to death on her husband’s pyre – continued to be glorified till the fifties when films like Maha Sati Savitri and Sati Nagkanya were made.

Bollywood’s obsession with the married women can be inferred not only from the sati films made since the beginning of the film industry but also from the titles of many other films, such as Dulhan (The Bride, 1958), Sindoor (Vermillion, 1987), Pati Parmeshwar (Husband Is God, 1989), Suhagan (Married Woman, 1964) etc.

An ideal wife according to Bollywood in the fifties:

Woke up at the crack of dawn to sing bhajans; she was exceedingly beautiful and sensuous, as well as maternal; she sewed missing
buttons, dressed in saris and wore the band of flowers that her husband brought for her on his way back from work. In spite of this, most of the drama arose from her victimization. (Somaaya, Kothari and Madangarli, 2012. p.10)

An important characteristic of wives in Hindi cinema is that she is always attired in traditional dresses, specifically sari. She sports lots of makeup and jewellery and unfailingly flaunts vermillion. All of these actually showcase her married status, which she has to shun when she becomes a widow. Her hair is always tied up, since loose hair depicts sexual flair (Chatterji, 1998).

The subservient nature of the Bollywood wife is perfectly captured in the song tumhi mere mandir, tumhi meri pooja tumhi devta ho (You are my temple, my worship, you are my god), picturised on Nutan in the film Khandaan (1965). The song captures the desire of the Indian male to be treated as god by his wife. Nutan, a versatile actress, played the stereotypical wife’s role in many films, such as Gauri (1968), Devi (1970), and Karma (1986).

Despite the influence of progressive elements on Hindi cinema such as Progressive Writer’s Association, early Hindi cinema did not accept the modern and educated woman and viewed her with mistrust. An educated and independent woman ultimately had to undergo certain changes in order to be a wife. A case in point is that of Madhubala who played the character of Anita in Mr. and Mrs. 55 (1955) – the flamboyant and westernized heiress sheds all her western attributes, dons the Sari and in the end marries Preetam played by Guru Dutt. Her change from an emancipated and gregarious woman who enjoys watching tennis to somebody who in order to be accepted becomes the ‘ideal woman’ explains once again the Bollywood’s early attempts to define the ‘proper’ and ‘decent’ woman. Virdi (2004) writes about Mr. and Mrs. 55: “most insidious and effective of all, the film pits the misguided, “westernised”, “individualist” woman against the model, self-effacing, traditional woman, making the modernised woman finally learn the values of an “Indian” sensibility.”

Even Bimal Roy, who is known for giving strong women characters such as Madhumati (1958), Sujata (1959) and Bandini (1963), made sure that her heroines “remained firmly within the threshold of domestic hearth” and “the space for these
women is reserved besides their men” (Somaaya et al., 2012). In Awaara (1951) and Shree 420 (1955), Raj Kapoor’s famous films, the heroines act as saviours and light houses, to whom the wayward and the lost hero must find his way. The job of the female characters in these films is to act as an anchor to the restless lives of the male leads. Despite having strong female characters, the primary job of the females in these films is to act as vassals to the male characters.

Hindi cinema regularly employed the idea of the selfless or the martyr wife. An apt example to give would be V. Shantaram’s hit Dahej (1950). Apparently, the film is a criticism of the dowry system prevalent in Indian societies. It tells the story of Chanda, played by Jayshree, who is married in a greedy family. Her in-laws tortured and humiliated her, because she did not bring the dowry they expected. Despite the degradation at the hands of her in-laws, she refuses to leave home even when physically forced to do so. She cites the ancient Hindu custom of a wife leaving her husband’s home only after her death. Dahej, according to Chatterji (1998), “underlines the beginning of a continuing trend in commercial Indian cinema whereby, while pretending to criticize patriarchy and its evils, a filmmaker actually patronizes and celebrates it.”

Pati Parmeshwar (1989) takes the concept of the martyr wife to a whole new level. It is the story of a devoted wife, Rekha (Sudha Chandran), whose husband (Shekhar Suman) spends most of his time with his mistress (Dimple Kapadia). Accepting her husband’s adulterous nature, Rekha tries to make the marriage work. When her husband is paralysed, she fasts, takes him to the mistress, and serves them, in the hope that he would see light. He does, repents, returns, and she accepts him. The film depicts the perennial servility and martyr nature of the Indian wives. The film was initially declined a pass by the film certification board. The board cited the guideline, 2 (iv) (a), which empowers the board to ensure that “visuals or words depicting women in ignoble servility to man or glorifying such servility as a praiseworthy quality, are not presented” (Moran, 1996). Taking a firm stand, the board gave the following reasons for not giving a go-ahead to the film:

The film upholds traditional subjugation of women as a positively desirable moral asset. In the process, woman has been shown as totally servile and this servility has been glorified both
in dialogues, visuals and recurring refrains of songs, highlighting this characteristic as a positive aspect of Indian culture. (Mehta, 2009, p.123)

Perhaps, it was the first time that the board banned a film on reasons other than obscene representations of women. Later, the film was not only defended by the actors but also by one of the two judges who arbitrated on the matter.

While the era of the self-sacrificing wife slowly diminished, Bollywood developed a new manner to depict husband--wife relationship – bigamy. Many films were made in the 1990s and onwards that showcased the husband having two wives. In order to dilute the serious matter of bigamy, the directors usually adopted comedy as a plot device. Justification of bigamy was very much prominent in films such as Saajan Chale Sasural (1996), Judaai (1997), Gharwali Baharwali (1998) and many others. This trend of bigamy as a plot had started with Naseeb Apna Apna (1986). In this film, the husband, in order to escape the first wife who is “not beautiful” and lacks “social graces” marries another woman who is not only “beautiful” but also “smart.” When the first wife discovers the relationship, instead of chastising her husband, she starts to live as a maid in the house with the second wife. This altruistic and sacrificing behaviour is reminiscence of the wives of the previous decades, who were willing to become martyrs at the drop of the hat of their husbands. In Naseeb Apna Apna (1986), when the second wife finally finds the truth of her husband’s bigamous relationship, she commits suicide. Paying the price of husband’s philandering, the second wife, played by Farah Naaz, is shown to committing suicide. It should be noted that while the husband was at fault in keeping both the women in dark about his marriage, women were shown suffering, one by one.

A common theme running through all these films portraying bigamy was that the wives or the women were very accepting of their husband’s second marriage. In Saajan Chale Sasural (1994), both wives are happy to share the husband. In Gharwali Baharwali (1998), the husband played by Anil Kapoor marries a second time for a male heir and in the end once again everybody is happy and contended with polygamy.

The climax scene of Gharwali Baharwali and Saajan Chale Sasural is the most absurd solution to the problem i.e. living happily under
the same roof and sharing the husband. The comedy is inane. But the morality preached is obnoxious. It tries to naturalise the idea that every Indian woman is mentally prepared for her husband to commit bigamy. (Chatterji, 1998; p. 71)

In *Khooon Bhari Maang* (1988), the film’s protagonist played by Rekha spends a lot of time and energy in order to take revenge, after her husband tried to kill her. She returns from a near-death experience to ultimately take revenge. However, her comeback is not only for revenge but also to show her new-found beauty, which she has managed to obtain through plastic surgery. Her husband had called her ugly, and even when her aim is to kill him, she tries to ensure that he falls for her beauty and charm. Underlying the plot is the assumption that a woman needs to be beautiful and charming all the time, even when she plans to kill someone.

While the Hindi film industry was busy casting wives in set portrayals, satisfying the needs of a patriarchal society, there were filmmakers who attempted to capture wives in an altogether different mood and tone. One of the earliest example of this is renowned filmmaker V. Shantaram whose film *Duniya Na Mane* (1937) captured the story of a young wife played by Shanta Apte. The young wife Nirmala is married to an old man in exchange for a bride-price. Nirmala is a confident young woman who makes sure to her husband that she is not happy with the marriage. One of the ways in which she shows her rebellion is by denying her husband sex. By showing to the public that not all women submit to their husbands unquestionably, the film was a pioneer in the portrayal of women, more so because the film was made in 1937. A Marathi version of the film was also made and the film went on to be showcased at the Venice International Film Festival (“Films”, n.d.). Nirmala, despite asserting her character and desires is an active participant in Hindu rites and that are observed for the welfare of the husband. This anomaly is presciently explained by Chatterji (1998):

> but this principle of fasting and *vrats* is practised in the breach by Nirmala in Duniya na Maane [sic] because her fasting is not really to preserve the life of her husband but rather, to belong to the fraternity of wives who perform *vrats* and vows. (p. 75-76).
Another example would be of Shabana Azmi’s character in *Yeh Kaisa Insaaf* (1980) where she agrees to marry after making a pact with her future husband. Shabana is shown as a working woman, and the pact is that she would continue to support her family after her marriage. Her husband reneges on the promise and demands her salary after the marriage – Shabana does not accept her husband’s logic that since she is married she is no longer connected to her family. She decides to walk away from the marriage. The film, not surprisingly, could not do well at the box office.

Gulzar’s *Aandhi* (1975) was an adaptation of a Hindi novel by the author Kamleshwar. The film tells the story of an ambitious wife Aarti Devi, played by Suchitra Sen. Aarti is the daughter of a politician and has ambitions of making it big on the political scene. However, her husband is not happy with her political ambitions and often fights with her. The domestic duals ultimately result in Aarti leaving her husband. In the end, the husband, after a reunion with the wife, encourages her to carry on with her political drive. It is interesting to note that in this case a happy blissful marriage is not the ultimate end of the film and a woman is allowed by the scriptwriter and the director to pursue her ambitions.

Another example of a wife who refuses to bow to her husband is from *Aap ki Kasam* (1974). Kamal Bhatnagar (Rajesh Khanna) is a jealous husband who begins to doubt the faithfulness of his wife Sunita (Mumtaz) when his best friend Mohan (Sanjeev Kumar) enters their lives. Sunita is unable to convince her husband of her loyalty and “refuses to play the victim, she is so enraged by her husband’s unwarranted suspicions that she leaves him. By the time he realizes his mistake and tries to go back to her, she is married again” (Somaaya et al., 2012). The wife in this film is not willing to be the martyr like in many previous depictions of wives. She not only refuses to be a victim but also annuls the marriage. By doing this, she asserts herself and makes it clear to her husband that she will not be a part of the marriage where she is not respected or trusted.

A rather daring portrayal of wives came in the last year of the nineties in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999). Nandini (Aishwarya Rai) is forced to marry Vanraj (Ajay Devgan) after her father discovers her romantic liaison with Sameer (Salman Khan). After the marriage, Nandini refuses to reciprocate the love of his husband who gets angry after repeatedly getting cold behaviour from his wife. When Vanraj
discovers the real reason behind Nandini’s behaviour, instead of getting angry or divorcing her, he agrees to go on a foreign quest to locate her wife’s lost love. In *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999), the wife once again refuses to conform to social standards, and the husband does not take this as an affront to his masculinity and is a willing partner in his wife’s quest to find her first love. However, in the end of the film, the director once again upholds the sanctity of the marriage; after Nandini discovers that she indeed loves her husband who has loved her unquestionably and is willing to do what no husband will do. What began as a radical take on marriage ended up once again in upholding the social demands from the marriage, that once married, a couple should remain husband and wife, irrespective of what trial and tribulations the wife or the husband have to bear.

One of the earliest depictions of women seeking love and sex outside marriage is B. R Chopra’s multi-starrer film *Gumraah* (1963). The movie examines the conflict of a married woman who is caught between her feelings for her lover and her fealty to her husband. The wife, played by the famous actress Mala Sinha, due to some cinematic circumstances is not able to marry her love and instead marries a much older person (Ashok Kumar). Her love returns to her life and she discreetly continues the romantic liaison with him. This is perhaps one of the first instances when the sacrosanct married woman is allowed on screen to meet her lover. However, by doing this, she also crossed the ‘Laxman Rekha’ or the age-old limitation set by the patriarchal Indian society for women. Interestingly, the film starts with a scene from Ramayana where Laxman makes the line for Sita while searching for lord Ram. Even before the film commences, the director makes it clear as to what the plot will be, by making a precise reference to the mythical Laxman’s line and by naming the film *Gumraah*, which translates to astray. And it is easy to guess the end of the film. The story ends with the wife confessing her transgressions to her husband who has also found the truth. The husband makes her realize that she has crossed the Laxman’s line. The film’s plot was undoubtedly bold for its time, and while the story writers allowed sufficient liberty for the women to exercise her individual rights, it is no surprise that the film labels her as ‘astray’, as she clearly has transgressed and needs to repent.

Not every adulterous wife feels guilty and returns to her husband. In *Ek Baar Phir* (1980), Kalpana, played by Deepti Naval, leaves her busy husband to live with
her boyfriend. She only falls in love with the other man, after her husband who is a film star keeps busy all the time and rarely has time for her. She neither finds love nor solace in her marriage and falls in love with an artist. Kalpana of Ek Baar Phir is a rare departure in the portrayal of wives; she is not willing to be a martyr like the wives of yesteryear. She crosses the mythical Laxman’s line and unlike the wife in Gumraah (1963) is not willing to come back and has the guts to squarely refuse her husband when he calls her back.

Directed by Dulal Guha, Do Anjaane (1976) is a story of an ambitious wife who acts as the villain in the film. The wife played by Rekha is clearly bored of her married life and when she gets the opportunity to leave the mundane life of her household and enter the world of glitz and glamour, she takes it. However, the wife in this case is too ambitious and views her husband as an obstacle. Ultimately, she plans the murder of her husband. After the murder, she enters the occupation of her desire, that is an actress. She also starts a live-in relationship with her lover, whom she later discards. The director also hints at the actress giving sexual favours in return of film contracts. The wife in Do Anjaane (1976) is clearly portrayed as a ruthless and ambitious woman who will stop at nothing in order to achieve what she wants. The film reflects the disdain the Indian society has for working woman, though women make up a significant percent of the working population. The film also casts aspersions on women who want to take up a career in show business. The film implies that such women are promiscuous and are willing to do anything for career advancement. But the depiction of the wife is a “dramatic departure from the usual heroine of the mainstream film who is too good to be true” (Chatterji, 1998). While the usual wives of Hindi cinema score high marks on all moral characteristics, in this case the wife is portrayed as a human with all her flaws and follies.

Director Yash Chopra took up the issue of extramarital affair in his famous film Silsila (1981). The film enjoys a cult status and boasts of a star cast with Amitabh Bachchan, Rekha, Jaya Bhaduri and Sanjeev Kumar. Due to circumstances typical of a Bollywood drama, Amit (Amitabh Bachchan) and Shobha (Jaya Bhaduri) marry but soon drift apart and their marriage become a loveless affair. Chandni (Rekha) is also imprisoned in a loveless marriage and plays the role of a perfect wife until she meets Amit with whom she had a relationship before the marriage. The wife (Rekha) in this film soon embarks on a full-fledged relationship with her ex-flame.
The film captures their relationship in picturesque locations. In a twist to the story, Amit decides that he can no longer continue his marriage to Shobha (Jaya Bhaduri) and wishes to reconcile with Chandni (Rekha). This news shatters Shobha—who was aware of Amit’s affair—but she does not lose hope. She believes that if her love is true he will return to her. Similarly, Chandni’s husband Dr. Anand is aware of and devastated by Chandni’s infidelity. In the end, both the lovers return to their respective spouses making their past affairs look like mistakes. Once again, the sanctity of the marriage is upheld by a filmmaker, who despite showing characters in whirlwind romantic relationship makes sure that the lovers realize their mistake and go back to their marriage. To drive home the message of inviolability of marriage, the film ends with a text slide reading: “Love is faith and faith is forever.” “Such is the obsessive reverence of the institution of marriage that no film in the history of Indian cinema has justified or applauded those who have transgressed/violated its strict moral code, no matter how compelling the circumstances are” (Kazmi, 2010).

Aruna Raje’s film Rihaee (1988) deals with the promiscuity of migrant labourers and the sexual desires of their wives who are left behind. The film is set in a village in the state of Gujrat where majority of the men have left their homes in search of livelihood, leaving their wives behind. Women in the village get excited when Mansukh (Naseeruddin Shah) returns after a long stint in Dubai; Mansukh is good looking and a philanderer. Women flock to him and he engages in sexual activity with many of them; all of them married. This is one of the first instances in Hindi cinema where the issue of the sexual desires of the wife left behind by the husband is addressed. Rihaee “is the most scathing attack ever, on the promiscuity of male migrant labourer vis-à-vis their assumption of sexual fidelity from their sex-starved wives” (Chatterji, 1998). While most of the women give easily to Mansukh’s temptation, one of them, Taku (Hema Malini), rebuffs his advances only to fall for him later. She becomes pregnant and confesses to her husband about her affair. She is compelled to abort the child. When she refuses, village panchayat is called to decide her fate. The panchayat headed by old men of the village is furious and is ready to exile her when women of the village speak in favour of her and erect a strong defence of a woman’s needs and the hypocrisy of the society in general. The village women declare a woman’s emotional and sexual needs as being natural, on par with a man’s. The women also ask for same yardsticks to be applied to both men and women, when
it comes to punishment for transgressions. The women in their impassioned defence expose the hypocrisy of a society that has long judged men and women with different criteria. Also, “by positioning the issue of a woman’s transgression in a private space as opposed to a public one and by treating it as a personal matter the film rejects the mythological legacy of Ram’s insistence on agnipareeksha and Sita’s exile” (Somaaya et al., 2012).

Although there have been brave attempts to portray wives outside the shackles of stereotyping in Hindi cinema, such as Radha (Nargis) in *Mother India* (1957), Rosy (Waheeda Rahman) in *Guide* (1965) and Aditi (Tabu) in *Astitva* (2000). By and large, Bollywood has always captured the woman in set casts. The ravishing but obedient wife, the ailing but tender mother, the gorgeous girlfriend who no doubt is intelligent and independent but would always need the muscular and brave hero to save her from the villains. In the portrayal of wives, there is no exception, a myriad of roles has been allotted to the wife, “of and on she (wife) began to surprise viewers with the odd and unconventional portrayal be it the Choti Bahu of *Sahab Bibi Aur Ghulam* or Rosy of *Guide* breaking marital chains to live with her lover in *Guide*” (Somaaya et al., 2012). But certain characteristics were always common to the tenderness, the caring nature and the sacrificial attitude. “The wife was dignified and never displayed sex appeal. She was devoted without being demanding. Her role was to provide solace, to empathize and to reprimand when the hero went astray” (Somaaya et al., 2012).

When it comes to the portrayal of wives or marriages, Hindi cinema over a period of time has created an artificial narrative about marriages, sacred vows and the role of the wives. It has more or less failed to represent the complex relationship between a man and a woman in a marriage and has continuously tried to uphold the notions about marriage and romance as portrayed in myths and folklores. Hindi cinema “represents romance and marriages not necessarily as they are in real life but how they could be or should be - or how they should not be” (Jones & Ramdas, 2004).

### 3.2 Women as Mothers and Unwed Mothers

While Hindi cinema’s fixation with romantic stories and family sagas has resulted in a myriad of roles being assigned to women as wives and girlfriends, another important role in which women have been casted since the beginning of
cinema’s history in India is that of mothers. In the Indian tradition, the mother-child relationship is seen as the most sacrosanct of all relations. The image of Krishna and Devki is one of the most recognised and respected cultural motifs in India. Just like the wife occupies a high and exalted position in Indian culture and there are lots of cultural expectations from her, the Indian mother too occupies a deity-like position in the Indian cultural hierarchy. She bears the burden of the many expectations that the society has from her. Mother’s role of a creator of life and nurturer of children has been elevated by infusing sacredness and a touch of divine. Another reason behind the idealization attached to the mother is the worship of female deities in India. For many Indians, the mother as deity and the mother as a family relation are similar identities. “Symbolised in mythology, legends and popular culture, she stands as an eternal icon to represent the generative, nurturing power in life” (Krishnaraj, 2010).

Writing about the role of mother in Hindi cinema, Gulzar et al. (2003) explain that “the mother cult has been, from the beginning, one of the strongest thematic strands in Indian cinema, ranging from noble, self-sacrificing mothers to those who pamper their sons and persecute their daughters-in-law.” This duality of mothers as care givers and mothers as persecutors is an often-repeated theme in Indian cinema. While the mother absolutely loves her male child in all the films that portray the family, in films involving a plot revolving around marriage, she suddenly becomes a villain for her daughter-in-law. The character of the mother-in-law in Bollywood often makes the life of her daughter-in-law torturous, for instance Bindu in Ghar Ho Toh Aisa (1990) and Biwi Ho Toh Aisi (1988).

“Many Hindi films start off with (or have, very near the beginning) a portrait of the idealized mother. This paragon of maternal perfection is generally played over and over again by actresses specializing in this role” (Kakar, 1981). Actresses such as Nirupama Roy, Reema Lagu, Fareeda Jalal and Waheeda Rahman were adept in portraying the roles of mothers in Hindi cinema. While Radha (Nargis) in Mother India (1957) played the mother and the wife, her role as mother stands out as the quintessential mother not only in Hindi cinema’s history but also as the idealised mother in the Indian society. Mother India is considered an iconic film and was India’s first submission to Academy Awards in 1958 in the foreign language film category. The trials and tribulations of Radha and her family are homage to the struggles of a newly independent India. The wife of a farmer Shamu (Raj Kumar),
who is in deep debt, Radha gets the role of a mother. Her life is a series of misfortunes and tragedies that are because of the debt her husband has incurred. Radha as a nurturer takes care of her children in the most adverse of all situations. She dons the role of a man and works in the fields toiling under the sun to earn meals for her family. Unlike the silent suffering mothers of this genre, Radha is capable of defending herself and also has the power to become the crusader in the end when she kills her own son who has adopted the life of banditry. The image of the suffering mother was so much appreciated by the audience that for the next decade, actresses had to bear the burden of being such mothers on the screen. It became a characteristic of many hit films such as *Aradhana* (1969), *Deewaar* (1975), *Trishul* (1978), *Baazigar* (1993), *Khalnayak* (1993) and *Karan Arjun* (1995).

Sarcar (n.d.) explain the roles of mothers in subsequent films:

> [Mother] was idolised and idealised but deprived of authority and agency. Not just selfless, she is self-less - she is a hollow symbol to be worshipped; she is asexual and inviolate. Constructed through the gaze of others – her husband, sons, in-laws, neighbours – and usually silent about her own desires, herself was more an absence. (p. 3)

An important role of mothers in Hindi films is to act as an object of revenge for the hero. In many films, the mother is killed, injured or insulted by the villain. It becomes a duty for the hero or the male protagonist to take revenge for her mother. Suffering is another important characteristic of the mother. This suffering can be due to economic reasons. While poverty is the main reason behind the trials of the mothers of Hindi cinema, an uncaring and a cruel husband is another source of her agony, which she bears silently and without complaining. Her only refuge is God, to whom she regularly prays in order to get the strength and courage to struggle, and also for her son in expectations. Much has been made of the image of the saviour son, who would one day grow up and not only provide her prosperity and economic wellbeing but also take revenge from the villains of her life. The villains can be the cruel husband who left her to face life alone or the devious money lender from the village or the archetype vicious villain (Amrish Puri as Thakur Durjan Singh in *Karan Arjun*, 1995) of Hindi cinema who takes great pleasure in torturing women. The centrality of
mother’s role in Hindi cinema can simply be defined as her relationship with her son. Kakar (1981) opines that the mother’s purpose in life is the welfare of the hero-as-child. She is devoted to ministering to the hero’s smallest needs and unspoken wishes, especially for food, often well into adulthood. Feeding the son, it is implied, is the greatest satisfaction that life can offer her. If for reasons of the plot, the baby-hero is unavailable, then the mother is often shown in the private world of her prayer-room where she is absorbed in devotion to child-Krishna, the quintessential son. (p. 15)

The character of a step-mother is also often displayed on screen where she is again stereotyped as a cruel, evil and a heartless creature whose only job is to make the life of the children troublesome and difficult. Films like Beta (1992) and Kishen Kanhaiya (1990) are examples of such mothers in Hindi films.

While the mother is always shown as part of the family, the character of single mother or an unwed mother has been a rarity in Hindi cinema. A notable first is the case of Meena (Mala Sinha) in Dhool ka Phool (1959). Directed by Yash Chopra, the film is the story of Meena and Mahesh (Rajendra Kumar) who are madly in love. Meena becomes a mother before their relationship transcends to that of a husband and wife. Meanwhile, Mahesh considers the child a ‘mistake’ and disowns both of them—the wife and the child. A child born out of wedlock is considered ‘illegitimate’ and is a big taboo in Indian society. Considering the shame of having a child before marriage, Meena gives up the baby and leaves the baby boy in a dark forest. It is pertinent to note that while the male protagonist (Mahesh) has no qualms about romancing and having sex with his female partner, the responsibility of the baby falls squarely on the shoulders of the girl. Meena is rescued by Ashok (played by Ashok Kumar) who is a lawyer and under whom Meena is working as an assistant. It is Ashok who not only falls in love with Meena but demonstrates the willingness to take the child. The film plainly tells that a single mother has no place in the Indian society and while a single man can bring up a child, a woman cannot do so. The only way through which a woman can rear a child is with the companionship of a man, as in the case of Meena who in the end takes the child back when Ashok is willing to give the child his “name”.
Vandana (Sharmila Tagore) in *Aradhana* (1969) is another case of an unwed mother, whose family refuses to accept her or her child. Just like Meena (Mala Sinha) of *Dhool Ka Phool* is unable to rear the child, Vandana too has to give up her child born out of marriage, and is forced to let a childless couple adopt him. Determined to be a part of his life, she accepts the responsibility of becoming his nanny. Sacrifice, it seems is the perennial fate of such women. Not only the mother in *Aradhana* (1969) is willing to be a servant in the house where her child is being brought up, she also takes up the blame for a murder her son commits. “In Aradhana the nation-state applauds a mother’s sacrifice for her son, while in Mother India (and Dewar) sacrificing the son is itself a daring act marshalled ultimately to affirm the good citizen’s service and subordination to the community/nation” (Virdi, 2003).

A prominent example of single mother portrayal is Kundan Shah’s *Kya Kehna* (2000). An independent and spirited Priya Bakshi (Preity Zinta) is the only daughter in a family of loving parents and brothers. She falls in love with Rahul (Saif Ali Khan); their relationship is not approved by her family as the family views the boy as being ‘unfit’ and ‘inappropriate’ for her, since the boy has a reputation of a Casanova. However, Priya convinces her parents to talk to Rahul about their marriage. The parents give in to her daughter’s plea, only to be rebuffed by the boy himself who says no to the marriage. Priya’s family is devastated when they discover that she is pregnant and they once again approach Rahul for marriage, who again refuses. While Priya has the option to terminate the pregnancy, she, against the wishes of her family, decides to keep the child. Here, Priya is no different from counterparts in previous films depicting unwed mothers. A common theme that runs through these films is the sudden and joyful discovery of being a mother. The women in *Dhool Ka Phool*, *Aradhana*, and *Kya Kehna* had the option of termination of pregnancy. However, all of them decide to keep the baby. After discovering that she is pregnant, Priya, longingly looks at a picture of baby deity Krishna, symbolising her intense desire to be a mother. The head of the family, the father expels Priya from the home as she has defied the family ‘norms’ and has broken a cardinal rule by getting pregnant before marriage. In an unusual departure from the portrayal of families in Hindi cinema, Priya’s family is shown to be unable to cope with the absence of Priya. Therefore, the family decides to bring her back. They also lovingly take care of their pregnant daughter. Since an Indian family and society traditionally are averse to single unwed
mothers, Priya and her family are ostracized from the community and are subjected to ridicule and humiliation. Her shaming is further exacerbated by a play in her school on unwed mothers. Depicting a similar story, the play shows the protagonist die because of the ‘shame’, thereby confirming that suicide is the only viable option for such women, the only way to restore the lost honour of the family. Surprisingly, it is the play that gives her the opportunity to explain herself to public. Priya takes the stage and mounts a spirited but emotional defence of her actions; her only ‘sin’ is that she loved somebody, not that she is pregnant. She also makes it clear that the people would have cared for her had she gone through the ceremonies of a marriage. According to her, the ‘blame’ lies with the man (Rahul) who refused to share responsibility. Her speech results in a thunderous applause from the audience. The audience in Priya’s speech are synonymous with the Indian public in general who are usually against mothers without husbands. And in one of a rare incident in Hindi cinema, the public has accepted such a woman. The film ends with Priya rejecting Rahul’s proposal. Rahul who has also been moved by her speech reminds her that he is the father of the baby, to which Priya replies that he is no longer the father and has lost all rights of fatherhood on the day he asked her to undergo abortion.

While *Kya Kehna* is a sharp departure from the portrayal of single mothers, Childers (2002) is of the opinion that “the film in fact reaffirms traditional stereotypes of women in which their behaviour is carefully controlled within a patriarchal framework.” Childers (2002) buttresses her argument by highlighting the fact that despite establishing the ‘goodness’ of Priya and the philanderer nature of Rahul, it is Priya that has to face censure and Rahul is left unscathed. She explains: “the total lack of public and family censure for Rahul’s part in the whole affair reminds us that ‘boys will be boys,’ while the disgrace and dishonour fall entirely upon Priya and her family.” Despite this criticism of the film, *Kya Kehna* stands distinctly from other films of the genre for its portrayal of single mothers and its depiction of the taboo topic of sex before marriage.

### 3.3 Women as Daughters

The literature on women’s portrayal in commercial cinema is abundant and diverse. However, this literature mainly focuses on romantic relationships between men and women and the caricature of women as mothers. Additionally, the portrayal
of courtesans and prostitutes has been detailed in several works, however, no definitive work [except Kakar (1981); Rajiva (2010)] could be found by this researcher on the portrayal of daughters per se. A simple explanation can be the fact that daughters in Hindi cinema ultimately transform into mothers, wives, and girlfriends.

A general observation from the analysis of commercial Hindi cinema is that while sons are definitely portrayed vis-à-vis their relationship with the mother, daughters are invariably depicted in relation to their fathers. This phenomenon has some resemblance to the general characteristic of the archetypical Indian family where sons are close to their mothers and daughters are intimate with their fathers.

Writing about the portrayal of daughters in Hindi cinema Kakar (1981) opines:

the father-daughter relationship in Hindi cinema is liberally sprinkled with dollops of 'pure' fantasy. In films where the father-daughter relationship is important for the plot, the father is often shown as a widower, with the heroine as his only daughter, the relationship being without the contaminating presence of the mother or other siblings who may disturb the idyll. (p. 19)

In majority of films that have daughters as transitory characters, the daughter is usually the apple of the eye of the entire family, especially the father who dotes on her and pampers her with gifts and unbridled affection. A common strand that runs through many such films that depict a household is the moment the daughter does something that can ‘besmirch’ the ‘honour’ of the family, namely, falling in love with a man of lower social strata or falling in love with a man belonging to ‘lower caste’ or an enemy family. In all these cases, she brings upon herself the ire of her father. The all indulgent and caring father suddenly turns into a sort of a villain. Fathers in such cases have variety of methods to ‘stop’ the daughter from pursuing her romantic aspirations. The most common method is to stop her going to the college, effectively putting her under a sort of house-arrest.

While the role of women as daughters follows similar trajectory in majority of commercial films released between 1950 and 2000, there are films such as Daddy (1989), Tamanna (1997) and Khamoshi: The Musical (1996) that stand apart.
Traditionally, the character of the daughter is seen as being dependent on the father. In Mahesh Bhatt’s *Daddy* (1989), it is the father who becomes dependent on the daughter for her support. The film is a compelling narrative of a *ghazal* singer (Anupam Kher) who has fallen on hard times and has taken to the drinking alcohol. Due to his alcoholism, he is unable to work and even her daughter is taken away from him. The daughter (Pooja Bhat) becomes his saviour and helps him regain his career and sanity again.

The daughter in *Khamoshi: The Musical* (1996), directed by the noted film director Sanjay Leela Bhansali, literally becomes the voice of her deaf and mute parents. Annie (Manisha Koirala) is born in a poor family where both her parents are handicapped. Her parents are completely dependent on her, also for economic reasons as she helps them in selling wares. She falls in love with a young man and wants to marry him; however, she gets pregnant before marriage and her parents are against the marriage since they do not want to lose the daughter. Tamanna has to leave her home as her parents do not allow her marriage. Despite reversing the roles of parents and their children, the film once again reiterates the ability of parents to stop the daughter from pursuing her romantic ambitions. The film, however, ends with Tamanna’s parents accepting her along with her child and husband.

The father in *Tamanna* (1997) is replaced by a eunuch (Paresh Rawal) who picks up an abandoned baby girl (Pooja Bhat) and adopts her. The film, in an interesting reversal of roles assigned to a father; the manly figure, to a eunuch. Commenting on the grievous issue of female infanticide, the biological father of the baby girl abandons her to die. While the biological father of Tamanna (Pooja Bhat) has left her to die, it is a eunuch who takes care of the baby, nurtures her, provides her education and makes her an independent woman.

Somayya (2004) surveying the role of daughters in Hindi cinema writes that “the image of daughter has completely changed over the years. From the completely submissive to the gently defiant, Hindi cinema has seen her maturing into a progressive woman, negotiating space and freedom with the patriarch of the family.”

**3.4 Women as Courtesans and Prostitutes**

The character of courtesans or *tawaif*, as it is called in Urdu, has been a favourite of Hindi filmmakers, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s (Booth, 2007).
While the colonial authorities chose “singing and dancing girls” to describe them, the word *tawaif* translates as a dancing girl, a singer and as a prostitute. Dancing girls have been a part of Indian culture since Vedic times and each era has treated them either with respect and deference or with downright hostility and indifference. The tradition of courtesans flourished in India until the 20th century, with Lucknow, the capital of the Avadh region, being the centre. The Indian courtesans can be compared to the geisha, the traditional Japanese female entertainers who were not only skilled hostesses but also like their Indian counterparts were adept in various performing arts.

The fascination of the Indian filmmakers with the character of courtesans and prostitutes can be gauged from the fact that as early as in 1924, Dada Saheb Phalke, pioneer of filmmaking in India, made a film called *Kanya Vikray* or Selling of girls. Films such as *Devadas* (1925) tackled the taboo subject of woman as a saleable commodity with reference to religious practises. Other films on the topic include *Midnight Girl* (1929) and *Vamp* (1926). Based on Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novella and directed by P. C. Barua, *Devdas* (1935) is a love triangle story that revolves around the courtesan Chandramukhi. The novella and the film were powerful enough to spawn many versions of the film, with *Devdas* (1955) directed by Bimal Roy and *Devdas* (2002) directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali being the important ones. *Pakeezah* (1971) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981) are other well-known films of this genre.

“Early courtesan films idealized the beauty and artistic skills of the historical mujrewali and portrayed prostitutes restored to social respectability through marriage” (Boejarat, 2006). The sexual nature of the profession was never made implicit in any courtesan film and was always hinted subtly. “In Hindi cinema, the courtesan is pure (*Pakeezah*) and part of this is she is never immodestly dressed. In fact, one of the pleasure of the courtesan films lies in the elaborate use of clothing and make-up” (Dwyer, 2007). The only exemption is that of Dev.D (2009) where the courtesan has metamorphosed into a prostitute. But then the director in this case never claimed to make an honest representation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhayay’s novella (“Trying to make”, 2007). While overt references to the sexuality of the dancer were hidden, other covert measures such as “facial expressions, dialogues, and lyrics served as tools of seduction. Songs become a repository of sexual metaphors” (Somaaya et al., 2012).
The courtesan in the film makes her living by her sexual charms, and so is presented as object of desire to the men in the ‘mehfil’ (gathering) and to the cinema audience. This usually culminates in mujra, where the filmmaker emphasises the details of lyrics, music, costume and mise-en-scene. (Dwyer, 2007, p. 85)

A common theme in all the courtesan-centric films are the vivid and rich song and dance sequences, paying homage to classical North Indian singing and dancing traditions. These films showcase the thumri singing style and the Kathak dance. The courtesan has been used both as minor and major character, she:

has also been a popular figure in film, where her attractions give rise to variety of pleasures in the audience. She is portrayed as a victim of men’s lust and as an object of viewer’s piety, but also delights the audience in being the object of the male gaze as she dances for entertainment. (Dwyer, 2007, p. 85)

Pramathesh Barua’s 1935 film Devdas narrates the story of Devdas (K.L. Saigal) who is deeply in love with his childhood sweetheart Parvati (Jamuna). Because of the circumstances, which are typical of a dramatic Hindi film, he is not able to marry his beloved, and takes to drinking and ends up wrecked – psychologically and mentally. It is pertinent to note that the character of Devdas in all the versions of the films (1935, 1955, 2002) has such an important effect in caricaturing the image of a drunken and lost lover that the name ‘Devdas’ has become eponymous in Indian society with such men. While Devdas is recuperating from mental trauma of the lost love, he meets the Chandramukhi (Rajkumari), a courtesan in Calcutta. The courtesan falls in love with him and takes care of the ailing lover, who due to a combination of heavy drinking and a wayward mental state is rapidly deteriorating. Devdas has promised Parvati that he would come to her in the hour of need, keeping the promise he visits her place but dies before he meets her. Parvati’s parents stop her from visiting him and she only hears about her death. In all the Devdas films, a common theme that runs through is the sacrificial nature of Chandramukhi, the courtesan. She loves Devdas and takes care of him but never claims him. She is content to be the ‘other’ woman and is satisfied with his promise that they would be together in the next life (Somaaya et al., 2012). It important to note
that the main role of the courtesan is to provide succour to the obsessive lover. She cares for him through his journey to destructive alcoholism and self-despair. Perhaps, it is due to the nature of her profession that the courtesan never comes publicly about her love, knowing that while the courtesan is celebrated as an artist she would never be accepted as a wife. In ‘Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema’ Bhaskar and Allen (2009) explain the courtesan in Hindi cinema

the courtesan as a public woman possessed of sexual agency is a figuration of femininity that is antithetical to the desired form of womanhood within the aristocratic home. At the same time, the courtesan is maddeningly attractive for aristocratic men, and the conflict between desire for the courtesan and the duty towards the family and the woman of the home in the Muslim Sociology can only be resolved with the rejection of the courtesan. (p. 20-21)

In all the versions of the Devdas, the story and plot remain common, though deviation occurs in Dev.D (2009). This Anurag Kashyap film is not a remake of the novella or the previous movies per se, but a modern-day look at the story, a spin-off would be a more appropriate term. Since the director was making a modern day Devdas, he takes abundant cinematic and thematic liberty. One such deviation occurs in the character of Chanda (Kalki Koechlin), the Chandramukhi of previous Devdas films. The coy and the elegant courtesans of Devdas films have metamorphosed into the outspoken and brash Chanda who due to a sex scandal takes up the profession of prostitution. Kalki’s character is a modern adaptation of Chandramukhi, which was most recently played by Madhuri Dixit in Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s Devdas. In the film, the young Leni is shown to be a fan of Madhuri’s, listening to the songs of Chandramukhi. When she takes up prostitution as a profession, she adopts the name Chandramukhi or Chanda, in honour of the character.

Meena Kumari’s role in Kamal Amrohi’s Pakeezah (1972) will always be remembered for her portrayal of Sahibjaan, the courtesan from Lucknow. The movie is considered as “a magnificent Hindi melodrama and one of the most accomplished and beautiful films in the transnational ‘courtesan with a heart of gold’ film genre” (Grant, 2009). Sahibjaan (Meena Kumari) is the daughter of a courtesan (Nargis), and is born in a graveyard after her mother falls into dire straits after being spurned by her
in-law’s family who refuses to accept the new bride because of her profession. The infant Sahibjaan is taken into a courtesan family who raises her to be an accomplished singer and dancer. “The heroine of Pakeezah is portrayed as if she were a pure spirit who is trapped within her own exquisite masquerade and the sublimely alluring yet tomb-like world of the Kotha like a bird in a gilded cage” (Bhaskar & Allen, 2009).

Sahibjaan falls in love with the dashing Salim Ahmad played by the suave Raaj Kumar, whom she meets under dramatic circumstances. In the end, she is married into the same family who rejected her mother for being a courtesan. Her acceptance into the family is not due to the family being liberal about her profession, but due to the fact that she shares the same noble ‘blood’ with the family. Once again, the concept of purity of blood comes into play, despite the courtesans being celebrated as exalted artists, at the end they remain impure women.

Umrao Jaan (1981), the quintessential courtesan film of Hindi Cinema is based on Lucknow’s famous poet and litterateur Mirza Hadi Ruswa’s novel Umrao Jaan Ada. The film tells the story of Umrao Jaan who ends up in a brothel after being kidnapped in childhood. Umrao Jaan grows up to be renowned courtesan, who is not only known for her melodious voice but is also dextrous with Urdu poetry. Umrao catches the eye of Nawab Sultan (Farooq Sheikh) who is besotted by her beauty and her beautiful poetry. They both fall in love; however, Sultan cannot marry her due to her profession and is married to somebody else. It is Sultan’s father who is against the union and severs their relationship forcing Sultan to marry another woman. Interestingly, Sultan’s father is also a frequent visitor to brothels. Umrao Jaan has many relationships in the film. Bhaskar and Allen (2009) explain the character of Umrao Jaan

Ali’s Umrao Jaan is shaped by an ambiguity in tone that centres upon the tension between the realist impulse of the novel whose courtesan, a woman who is knowledgeable in the ways of the world and uses the art of love to her advantage, and the idioms of the courtesan genre that emphasises the purity of the heroine. (p. 193)

Ali’s film focuses on the formation of the courtesan. It narrates the tragic irony of a woman who is so refined and cultivated that she can enter into a relationship with a noble as his equal, and yet whose very
refinement is like a poisoned chalice, a mark of her identity as a courtesan, that condemns her to be a cynosure of all eyes but belong to no one. (p. 200)

In the end, because of the narrative drama of a Hindi film, Umrao Jaan manages to meet her family. Her mother is joyed to meet Umrao Jaan but her brother is against her coming back to the family as she was in a ‘disreputable’ profession. She is rejected by her family for being a courtesan and goes back to the brothel, which has been devastated due to the disturbances of the revolt of 1857.

An oft en-repeated dichotomy in courtesan films is the tussle between the demands of their profession and the attempts by the filmmaker to show them as pure

While the allure of the courtesan figure is rooted in her beauty, her art and the charge of her sexuality that is available to all men, especially to the highest bidder, she is also conventionally portrayed as ‘pure’ either literally or metaphorically. (Bhaskar & Allen, 2009, p. 173)

Booth (2007) writing about courtesan genre says that “cinematic tawaifs are female characters that often (and despite their situations) appear to possess more independence and assertiveness (in cinematic terms) than most normal female roles.” He further adds that “Tawaif films are almost certainly not “about” the social transformation of actual tawaifs – a non-existent tradition in modern India – or of actual prostitutes, but on a less explicit level, they are about gender, gender identities, and gender anxieties.” This is evident from majority of courtesan-centric films, where the courtesans despite having a strong personality and assertiveness ultimately vie for a man’s attention and always end up falling hopelessly in love. Moreover, in some cases, the courtesan remains in self-despair and has an identity crisis. Sahibjaan (Meena Kumari) of Pakeezah (1972), despite getting a chance to marry the love of her life, runs from the marriage after realising that she is ‘impure’ and not dignified enough to marry. Chandramukhi of Devdas (1935, 1955 and 2002) also falls in love with a man who is already deep in love with another woman. Despite knowing that she would never fulfil her romantic aspirations, she is content to care for the alcoholic Devdas and has braced herself for unrequited love. For another time, a woman is sacrificing herself for the man.
From Chandramukhi of Devdas to Umrao Jaan Ada in Umrao Jaan, “the courtesan is a totally romantic figure: a beautiful but tragic woman, who pours out her grief for the love she is denied in tears, poetry and dance” (Dwyer, 2007).

Though the courtesan genre narrates the story of a woman, ultimately they adhere to a male-centric world-view. According to Bhaskar and Allen (2009), the courtesan is a “debased figure catering to patriarchal double standards.” Booth (2007) in a study that identified twenty-four courtesan films summarises the portrayal of the courtesan

The tawaif’s body, on the other hand, is one that has been conventionally removed from the control of respectable society and family. Some tawaifs are represented as having a high degree of independence from any control; others are subject to the control in relationships that combine varying degrees of social or hereditary kinship, commodification, criminality, and sexual objectification. (p. 7)

Described as the oldest profession in the world (Flowers, 1998), prostitution has been practised in all ancient and modern cultures, from Mesopotamian to the Roman civilization (Faraone & McClure, 2008). Men’s paying for sex has been the truth of mankind’s culture and history. Equally true is the fact that despite being a part of every culture across ages, prostitutes have been ostracized and shunned, often forced to live in ghettos that transformed to the modern-day red light areas. Sentenced to the lowest rung of societal hierarchy, prostitutes have been condemned unequivocally in all religious scriptures, with some of them proscribing the death sentence for such women. Prostitutes have also been used to create the ‘good woman-bad woman binary’, with many cultures reserving the word (prostitute, slut) for women viewed as promiscuous. Many feminist authors view the profession as patriarchy’s ultimate control over a woman’s body. While the prostitute is required to present her body to men and be ‘available’ all times, she is condemned for doing so. Campbell (2006) in Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in Cinema writes that “while marriage is upheld, celebrated—especially idealized whenever social forces threaten to undermine it, as in the current phase of late capitalism—prostitution is swept under the carpet, hidden away out of sight or quarantined in red-light districts.”
Hindi cinema has been able to distinguish between courtesans and prostitutes. While the courtesan is a product of a particular culture and time (19th century Awadh), prostitute is the modern-day incarnation of the dignified courtesan from the past. The prostitute in Hindi cinema is never confused about her identity and is showcased as a brash and confident woman who is ever willing to sell her body. The prostitute is akin to the sirens in Greek mythology, who were beautiful but dangerous creatures who lured men (sailors) by their sensuous singing and led the men to shipwreck and destruction. Moreover, it was the men who were pained to see the sexual nature of the women’s profession and wanted to ‘rescue’ them from degradation and a life without monogamy. *Chetna* (1970) directed by B. R. Ishara is the story of Seema (Rehana Sultan) who meets a young and a very shy man called Anil (Anil Dhawan). In one telling scene, Seema is shown simultaneously stripping and preparing a drink, confirming the assumed debauched nature of a prostitute’s life. It is pertinent to note that drinking and smoking are vices that the Hindi film prostitutes always seem to have. The actress who has multiple scenes of partial nudity was never able to get another meaningful role in films and the film virtually ended her career (“Why Silk Smitha”, n.d.). This demonstrates the hypocrisy of the industry that is willing to portray the woman in nude for the sake of commercialization but ‘typecasts’ an actress in a role and refuses to give her any further work. Despite the actress Rehana Sultan winning the National Film Award for Best Actress for *Dastak* (1970), her career ended after she chose to play the role of a prostitute. Chetna has prolonged scenes of nudity and the director and the camera makes it sure that the actress is captured in as titillating poses as possible. The prostitute in this case is not only for the sexual consumption of the male character in the film but has been literally placed on a platter for the audience as well, confirming Mulvey’s (1989) exposition of the male gaze in visual arts. In one scene, Seema is standing naked; Anil turns her face and throws her clothes towards her, signalling that he is not comfortable with her nudity. The prostitute in this case is alluring the man towards her and is seen as ‘corrupting’ the man. As mentioned earlier, the woman as a prostitute acts as the mythical Sirens who lure men to their destruction. Later in the story, Seema accepts Anil’s proposal and is willing to marry him. only to consume poison in the end and ending her life. Unbeknownst to Anil, Seema has become pregnant and does not know who the father is. Seema as a prostitute is confident of her profession and never mixes her words when it comes to a relationship between a man and a woman. When she
accepts the marriage proposal, she suddenly becomes aware of her identity and is afraid to join the society. Ostensibly, the film is about rehabilitation of the prostitute, her ‘rescue’ from the dungeons of a brothel to the ‘respectable’ society as a wife. But the director’s “crude cinematographic treatment of script and visuals diluted the seriousness of the film. At best Chetna could be said to have used the prostitute as spectacle” (Chatterji, 1998).

Starring Padmini Kolhapure (Chandra) and Kunal Kapoor (Kunal), Ahista Ahista (1981) dwells once again on the subject of rehabilitation of women, though this time the rehabilitation is not aimed towards the prostitute but a girl (Chandra) born into a family of devdasis. Chandra (Padmini Kolhapure) is born in a brothel. The women in the family are overjoyed with the birth of a girl as that means one more earning member. While her mother cries at the time of her birth, since she is wary of her new-born daughter following the profession of the household. She gets education and eventually falls in love with her neighbour Kunal (Kunal Kapoor). It is important to note that the escape and redemption that Chandra hopes to get will not come to her through education but her prospective marriage to Kunal. Marriage is shown as the saviour of a prostitute like in many other prostitute-centric films. Due to the twist of events, Chandra is not able to marry Kunal, and is introduced to the world of religiously sanctioned prostitution in an elaborate initiation ceremony. Unable to marry the love of her life and extremely pained to become a devdasi, Chandra commits suicide in the end. “The film highlights the inescapable truth of a devdasi in the modern environment for whom, education simply postpones the entry into her family trade” (Chatterji, 1998).

Explaining the portrayal of prostitutes in Hollywood, Campbell (2006) writes that

Predominantly, and unsurprisingly given that the film industry internationally has been male dominated, prostitute characters in film are creatures of the male imagination. That is, though the characters are of course portrayed by women, the roles are usually written and the performances directed by men. (Campbell, 2006. p. 5)

While the male is willing to visit a prostitute or a courtesan for sexual gratification, the profession forever remains as a degraded and tainted one. This explains as to why
many courtesans and prostitutes portrayed in Hindi cinema prefer a tragic end for themselves. A prostitute would never have a happy ending. The filmmaker makes it sure to punish her for choosing such a profession. The tragic lives of prostitutes and courtesans have been romanticized. The pain and suffering she has to endure are a fait accompli. Moreover, time and again Hindi cinema has shown that the only way in which the courtesan or the prostitute can get redemption is through marriage. Marriage is the ultimate saviour of all women who engage in this profession. While many films talk about the supposed rehabilitation of the prostitute, they always end up in the objectification of the body of the women. Since sex is the occupation of such women, the filmmakers have time and again portrayed them as objects of sexual gratification. Even the courtesan films that rarely talk about sex overtly, ensure, through clever cinematography and visual techniques, to inform the audience that the courtesan in the end is for sexual gratification. Sexual objectification of women engaged in sex trade is the dominant theme of almost all such films. Oldenburg (1976), an authority on the courtesans of Lucknow, through a series of detailed interviews conducted with the courtesans in 1976 onwards, sketches a fascinating portrayal of the courtesans in the old city. She writes that courtesans were punished by the British “for proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule in 1857.” Not only courtesans helped the rebels of 1857, their lives before the rebellion make for an interesting study. Oldenburg (1976) writes that the courtesans commanded great respect in the court and in society, and association with them bestowed prestige on those who were invited to their salons for cultural soirées. It was not uncommon for the young sons of the nobility to be sent to the best-known salons for instruction in etiquette, the art of conversation and polite manners, and the appreciation of Urdu literature. (p. 263)

Oldenburg (1976) further explains:

In a departure from the conventional perspective on this profession, I would argue that these women, even today, are independent, and consciously involved in the covert subversion of a male-dominated world; they celebrate womanhood in the privacy of their apartments by
resisting and inverting the rules of gender of the larger society of which they are part. Their way of life is not complicitous with male authority; on the contrary, in their own self-perceptions, definitions, and descriptions they are engaged in ceaseless and chiefly non-confrontational resistance to the new regulations and the resultant loss of prestige they have suffered since colonial rule began. It would be no exaggeration to say that their “life-style” is resistance to rather than a perpetuation of patriarchal values. (p. 261)

Oldenburg’s explanation of the lives of the courtesans is diametrically opposed to the manner in which Hindi cinema has caricatured them. Courtesans have been shown to be women forever stricken with love and longing. Often failing to get the love they so desired, they are doomed to live a life full of suffering and agony. And their salvation always lies with men who would one day come and rescue them from the brothel.

3.5 Women as rape victims

Rape is a grave crime that afflicts almost every country in the world, including the developed ones. In the year 2014, 11.4 percent of all crimes committed in India were against women, with rape being the fifth most common crime (National Crime Records Bureau, 2014). With many high-profile rape cases over a period of time, the issue of rape has assumed great importance in the national discourse. Media has always taken great interest in rapes and the issues surrounding the crime. Films are no exception and have tried to depict both the act of rape and its effect on victims.

While there is no dearth of films related to women issues, films having rape as the central motif are fewer in number. Insaaf Ka Tarazu (1980) or the Scales of Justice directed by B. R. Chopra is one such film. A dextrous director, Chopra made his career depicting love on the big screen takes up the issue of rape in this film starring Zeenat Aman as Bharti, the model, and Raj Babbar as Ramesh, the business tycoon. Bharti has been crowned Miss India and is a known fashion model who regularly goes to photo shoots and events. Bharti is confident of her sexuality and is shown as a strong willed and independent woman who is making a name for herself in the world of fashion. Ramesh, the business tycoon, is clearly besotted by her and is always plotting to make him closer to her. Bharti is already engaged and is oblivious to the fact that she is the centre of attraction of the businessman. Ramesh is rebuffed
many times unintentionally by Bharti. He takes umbrage to this and one day rapes Bharti. While raping, he makes it clear to her that he is doing this in order to take revenge of his rejection. He says to her that he has never faced an insult in his life. By saying this, he confirms the all too familiar cases of the spurned lover taking revenge on a girl prevalent in India. Bharti is adamant for justice and goes to the court, only to get her plea rejected by the Judge who is convinced by the arguments of the defence lawyer. The defence lawyer’s argument once again unearths the deep malaise that runs in our society when it comes to the legal issues surrounding a crime like rape. The lawyer shows to the courtroom Bharti’s pictures from various photo sessions and explains to the court that a woman who chooses to get herself pictured in such revealing clothes is of questionable moral character and her version of events cannot be trusted. By questioning her morality, the defence lawyer explains the hidden assumptions in our society about women who choose the career of show business and modelling. The general belief in the Indian society is that a woman of ‘good family’ would never opt for such a career and those who do so are not only promiscuous, willing to exchange sex for career advancement, and consequently deserve such fates. Additionally, this is also demonstrated that women opting modelling as career should not complain when something like molestation or rape happens to them. To add insult to the injury, the defence lawyer also makes the victim feels like a criminal as he even questions her attempt to bring the case to a court. He raises the issue of the ‘Indian Woman’ who according to him should not raise hue and cry if she is raped. She “would be overcome with shame and should drown herself” rather than complaining about rape.

In the end, Bharti kills Ramesh after he rapes her sister as well. Again, she faces a courtroom. This time, however, she gives an impassioned defence for her action and is set free by the court. Bharti has been victimised once and she is not willing to be a victim once again and takes the rein in her own hands by choosing to defend herself rather than hiring a lawyer.

The importance of IKT lies in the fact that perhaps never before has there been such an overtly aggressive female protagonist, who not only physically liquidates her tormentor, but also in a clever display of semantics, redraws the terrain so that the accused becomes the accuser and the judge is accused. (Kazmi, 2010, p. 234)
The film’s importance also lies in the fact that it was released at the time when several sensational cases of rape were making the headlines across the nation including the Mathura rape case of 1972, Rameeza Bi’s case of 1978 and Maya Tyagi’s rape in 1980. Though there are strong plot similarities between *Insaaf ka Tarazu* and Hollywood’s *Lipstick* (1976), the film was perhaps the story writer’s and director’s way of telling that not all women are willing to suffer silently and that some are ready to take action as well. Chatterji (1998) espouses a different point of view, according to her reading of the film, the film pretended to portray the evils of rape but due to the powerful audio-visual effects of cinema managed to produce just the opposite effect. The visual grammar employed by the director actually ends up playing up to the sexual fantasies of the male audience. She further criticises the choreography of the rape scenes in the films that are portrayed in an erotic manner. The scenes could have been shot in many other ways, doing away with the unnecessary titillation and the building up of sexual crescendo.

From a feminist film theory’s point of view, the drawback in the film is that in the end when Bharti is criticizing the system and defending her action, she says that each time a woman is violated a place of worship is desecrated. The juxtaposition of the scene with visuals of temples and mosques is similar to the demands of the Indian society. The filmmaker manages to compare a woman with a deity and a place of worship and the film “falls into the trap of rejecting rape not because it is a uniquely perverse assertion of men’s power but because women, the victims, are likened to religious shrines” (Virdi, 2003).

*Ghar* (1978), directed by Manik Chatterji, deals with the relationship between a husband and a wife who had to face an ‘unfortunate’ incident, namely the rape of the wife and its aftermath on their married life. While returning from a late night movie, the married couple, the husband played by Vinod Mehra and the wife by Rekha, are waylaid by goons and the wife is gang raped by the criminals. As compared to *Insaaf Ka Tarazu*, *Ghar* does not portray rape in an erotic manner and keeps it subtle. The incident makes headlines and is subjected to discussion by politicians and administration. All this unwanted attention and the traumatised feelings Aarti (Rekha) has to bear makes her life unbearable. The film is one of the first depictions of the effects of rape on marriage, a taboo subject. “At its core, “Ghar” is about the plight of a rape victim and her spouse, the vicissitudes of their
life, their very personal agony played out in public” (Salam, 2014). The film was a box office flop. Chatterji (1998) interprets the failure as the film lacking rape visuals and eroticisation of rape. Audience according to her are less interested in the subtle and psychological treatment of rape and more interested in visuals.

In her 1989 seminal essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, renowned feminist scholar Laura Mulvey elucidated the concept of ‘Male Gaze’ in cinema. Employing the art of psychoanalysis on films, she dissects the role of films as a medium providing visual pleasure to both the characters and the audience. Quoting Sigmund Freud generously, Mulvey explains that cinema “offers a number of possible pleasures” and satisfies a “primordial wish for pleasurable looking.” Writing about the portrayal of women on screen, she explains that “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact, so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” Applying the know-how of Mulvey on Hindi rape-centric films, one comes to the conclusion that while men who rape are often punished by the women themselves (rape-revenge genre) and are portrayed as evil, when it comes to the depiction of rape the filmmaker and the scriptwriter have time and again failed to do justice to the filming of the scenes. Though many films are aimed at condemning rape and showing it as an evil, perverse act, filmmakers end up sexing up the rape scenes – making it look more sexual and erotic. Rape scenes are choreographed to create a sexual crescendo and often employ clever visual techniques to suggest the invisible. For instance, in *Insaaf ka Tarazu* (1980), in the first rape scene, while Ramesh (Raj Babbar) is raping Bharti (Zeenat Aman), the scene is juxtaposed with visuals of nude paintings on the wall, giving audience a cue to pleasurably imagine the rape victim in the nude, since only limited nudity is allowed by the film certification board. While the film ends with punishing the rapist and the victims are avenged, one needs to critically examine as to why the rape scenes were unnecessarily eroticised. Gulzar et al. (2003) write that “the phenomenon of rape has been used in Hindi films often as a means of bringing sensual excitement and action to the script almost making a mockery of one of the worst and most heinous crimes perpetrated against women in real life.” The statement stands corrected because even in the films where rape is a central plot device the story writer has often ended up using the rape visuals to create sexual excitement.
Rani Mukherjee’s debut *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat* (1997) narrates the story of Mala (Rani Mukherjee) who gets raped as a revenge by Raj (Shadaab Khan). Raj sexually assaults her in order to teach her a ‘lesson’ after she ends the marriage of his friend who has cheated on Mala’s friend. Almost all rape-centric films have courtroom scenes and this film is no exception; however, in this case, the judge in order to ‘punish’ the rapist delivers a strange judgement. He orders the rapist to marry the victim in 24 hours. The rapist family makes several attempt to kill Mala, but are not able to do so and ultimately they are married.

The film’s name translates to ‘My King Will Arrive’ and is an allusion to the apparent desire of women, especially Indian women to marry a handsome prince who will not only sweep them off their feet but their marriage will also be dream-like. Translating the desire of Indian women to marry a prince charming to perverse levels, the film makers thought that it is prudent to include a dream sequence song where the rape victim imagines her rapist as her future husband. Not only the victim has forgiven her rapist in a short period of time, she is ready to accept him as her husband and in fantasy sequence she envisages her assailant as the prince charming. It is important to note that in the beginning of the film Mala comes off as a strong character and in order to help her friend whose lover has left her and is marrying another woman she confronts the wedding party and in the verbal confrontation that ensues she says that “a woman doesn’t need the aid of a man”. After the rape when her defence lawyer reminds her that a rape case is a messy affair and she has to recount all the grisly details of the sexual assault in the courtroom again, Mala is defiant and says that she wants justice and is ready to do everything in order to punish the rapist. Moreover, she says that she is proud to be a woman and is capable of carrying and nurturing her own life. In the courtroom, the lawyer of the accused intends to prove that there was no rape and whatever happened was due to consent. However, Mala in a fierce monologue takes everybody to task: the lawyer, the judge and the society. She asks the court as to why the court is biased towards the accused and why it necessary to invoke the details of the rape publicly. Her defiant and fierce character is transformed miraculously after her marriage and she is transmuted into the wives of earlier Hindi films, always acquiescing and subservient to her husband and in-laws. The filmmakers do not bother to explain the unexplained transformation. Mala is repeatedly belittled and harassed by her husband’s family.
She remains stoic and takes all the harassment with poise. Once again, the question remains as to why the woman who was earlier adamant for justice has accepted the verdict of her marriage to her rapist and is willing to live with him.

Writing about the representation of rape in *Rape and Representation*, Higgins and Silver (1999) explain that rape is used both as a structuring device and as an illusion,

an obsessive inscription - and an obsessive erasure - of sexual violence against women (and by those placed by society in the position of 'woman') .... Over and over. rape exists as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety, contradiction, or censorship. (Higgins & Silver, 1999 cited in Virdi, 1999)

The incidence of sexual violence against women is greater in societies that have male-dominated ideologies and a history of violence, as is the case in India (Burt, 1980; Check & Malamuth, 1985; Linz & Malamuth, 1993, cited in Ramasubramanian and Oliver, 2003). Because of films being the dominating form of entertainment in India, and the sheer size and the penetration of the film industry, the portrayal of both the rape and its victims is a troublesome issue. In this regard, the effect of cinema in creating impressions in young minds cannot be underestimated. Researchers in the North American context have found that children and adolescents use media narratives (especially teen magazines and prime-time television programs) as sexual scripts for earning about dominant norms concerning gender, love, and sexuality (Carpenter, 1998; Ward, 1995; Wood, 2001; Pardun, 2002; Wood, Senn, Desmarais, Park, & Verberg, 2002 cited in Ramasubramanian and Oliver, 2003).