
Representation of the Modern Bengali Feminine in Hindi Cinema, OTT, and Television and its Impact on Society

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Abstract

The trope of the 'Bengali feminine' as a symbolic representation of the motherland has been used in Bengali literature and cinema from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* (1882), all the way up to Ritwik Ghatak's ground-breaking film, *Subarnarekha* (1965). Traditionally, the construction and preservation of the post-independence Bengali cultural identity heavily relied on the 'Bengali woman,' who embodied both liberal and conservative ideals. She was a working woman and simultaneously, an image of serene domesticity. She was portrayed as modern but not outright evil. However, the advent of commercial television and the entry of Sindhi and Punjabi filmmakers in Bollywood altered the landscape, leading to significant changes in character representation. There was a displacement, a spatial negotiation of sorts, between the storytellers and the film producers – and that is why the stories and the representation of characters changed drastically. Today, the 'modern Bengali feminine' in most Hindi films, OTT shows, and soap operas has been straitjacketed into one of these three caricatures: the troublemaker, the homewrecker, and the witch. The representation has had a large-scale impact on how Bengalis (especially Bengali women) are perceived outside of the Bangla-speaking regions of the Indian subcontinent. This paper examines prominent Hindi movies, soap operas, and OTT shows from the past two decades to analyze the emergence of this representation in the Hindi film and television industry. It delves into the factors influencing this portrayal and assesses its broader societal impact.

Keywords:

Bengali feminine, stereotype, soap operas, liberal, representation.

Introduction

Bollywood's extensive engagement with Bengali filmmakers and performers has been widely acknowledged over the years. Bengal's contribution to the world of 'character actors' is both significant and diverse. Figures like Utpal Dutt, with his remarkable ability to infuse art into both archaic English and Banarasi Hindi dialects, and Keshto Mukherjee, renowned for his convincing portrayal of inebriated characters, have left their indelible mark. However, what truly intrigues in the realm of Bollywood is its leadership. Bombay (now Mumbai), the heart of India's Hindi film industry and the source of the 'B' in Bollywood, remains home to two substantial communities with limited involvement in the industry. While Gujaratis and Marathis together constitute nearly two-thirds of the city's population, they have played a relatively minor role in the Bollywood scene. In a city where Gujaratis predominantly dominate commerce, including the significant capital market, and Marathis hold sway in the state and bureaucracy, their influence in Bollywood remains notably modest. While exceptions such as the legendary Marathi singer Lata Mangeshkar and the exceptional Gujarati actor Sanjeev Kumar can be cited, they stand as rarities rather than the norm.

Two groups abound in Bollywood today: the North Indians who speak Hindi and Urdu and, most significantly, the Sindhis and Punjabis who lived around the cities of Lahore and Karachi in the pre-partitioned Indian subcontinent. What accounts for this Punjabi domination in Bollywood and the disappearance of Bengali talent into obscurity in today's distinctly North-Indian (rather than pan-Indian) film industry? Their culture. Indian soap operas frequently feature the traditional Gujarati business families. Similar to this, modern Bollywood is built around the flamboyant lifestyle and culture of North Indians. The genesis of the mid-1990s cinema genre, most exemplified by *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun...!* and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, is described by Tejaswini Ganti with a clever word. She considers the making of significant films over the past two decades and the growing recognition given to Bollywood films by the

government and the mainstream press as 'gentrification'. When Ganti undertook her research in Mumbai between 1996-2006, she observed that Hindi filmmakers disassociated themselves from "the so-called financially disadvantaged masses". According to Ganti:

"Just as urban gentrification is marked by a vocabulary of progress, renovation, and beautification, which is predicated upon social difference... the gentrification of Hindi cinema is articulated through a discourse of quality, improvement, and innovation that is often based upon exacerbating the displacement of the poor and working-class...".

(Ganti)

This procedure is related to the aspiration of filmmakers to be recognised as participants in a reputable trade, one that shuns the moral and social stigmas that stem from the sources of their funding, the social backgrounds of their employees, and the socio-economic backgrounds of their audiences. From *Devdas* to the popular OTT production, *Bulbul* on Netflix, Bollywood does not celebrate the Bengali language, culture, or its people. Over the years it has done its best to turn Bengal and its culture into a stereotype that was both similar to and distinct from the real Bengali culture, a stereotype produced to suit the political preferences and cultural prejudices of the Indian State and forced down the viewers' throats by producers and screenwriters. The myths and preconceptions about Bengal and Bengalis are perpetuated by these cinema portrayals, which also contribute to the 'Indianization' of the Bengali identity.

To offer the viewer a sense of routine, recognition, and mild exotica, regional and cultural distinctions are obscured. It is through such motion picture representations that the Hindi Belt can comprehend modern Bengal and Kolkata. By fusing aspects of North Indian culture with those of Bengali culture, it is possible to appropriate Bengal and Bengali culture while erasing political and artistic sub-national distinctions under an amalgamated Indian identity. (Mridha) According to Stuart Hall's theory in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, identity is produced both through and by means of representation. Hall writes:

“Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in the process, and always constituted within and not outside, representation”. (Hall 110)

Problematic Representation of the Bengali Masculine and Feminine in Hindi Productions

In the recent Disney + HotStar production *The Night Manager*, featuring Aditya Roy Kapoor as the charming half-Bengali character, Shaan Sengupta, the constant emphasis on his Bengali heritage, particularly his surname, is notable. His claim to Bengali identity seems to hinge on his ability to jest with a few Bengali expletives. This reduction of Bengal's rich culture to a caricature of a pot-bellied, middle-aged man speaking Hindi with a Bengali accent and casually using obscene Bengali words has been a recurring theme in Bollywood's portrayal of Bengal's diverse culture. Many of these prevailing stereotypes are thoughtfully examined by Mrinalini Sinha in her work, *The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Sinha eloquently outlines her criteria, illustrating how repeated references to the effeminacy of Bengali men served to support a fragile British self-image while also justifying the continued British presence in India. Sinha's analysis effectively connects late Victorian anxieties to the stigmatizing characteristics imposed on Indian Bengali males, including notions of unreliability and pretentiousness.

Another instance is the renowned feminist OTT project on Netflix, *Bulbul*, which frustrates Bengali viewers with its erroneous portrayal of colonial Bengal. The glamour and splendour with which colonial Bengal is portrayed - as opposed to the enormous wealth outflow that the province endured throughout the era of colonialism - may lead viewers who are not familiar with the background of colonial Bengal to believe that the region was drowning in luxury. While some of the most renowned film critics have chosen to focus only on the feminist perspective in *Bulbul*, the Netflix original uses multiple Bengali aesthetic and cultural signposts to construct a wicked space of female

subservience, sexual misconduct, and gender bias that is far, far removed from commonplace Hindi society. Bengali cultural emblems are beautiful aesthetics that look beautiful on screen, such as the Bengali saree drape and words that evoke the desired aesthetic 'bangaliana' (Bengali-ness) which appeal to an audience that enjoys 'exoticizing' an ethnic group. This supposed aesthetic choice, probably brought on by the director, Anvita Dutt's love for Tagore, also conveniently relocates these societal problems at a different era and location, keeping them as far away from the contemporary Indian nation-state and its artistic epicentre—the Hindi heartland—as is conceivable.

The Other's origins have always been located in the Gothic. To highlight how distinct Catholic Europe or the Orient was from Protestant England, British gothic writers frequently set their plots there. Similarly, Bengal appears as the 'other'—gothic, bad, or otherwise—of the modern Indian nation-state. This technique of depiction also provides an erroneous genesis for the societal problems that are depicted in the movie and are prevalent in modern India. Ironically, societal ills like child marriage and intimate partner abuse are more common in the Hindi Belt than they are in West Bengal, in contemporary India.

Imperial Bengal has always been portrayed with a distinct Mughal ambiance, ever since Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*. This purposeful chronological crisis is intended to appeal to the predominantly Hindi-speaking audiences from North India, who are more acquainted with Mughal splendour than the anglicised way of life of colonial Bengal's elite. This form of depiction is also consistent with the glossy portrayal of India that has been common in most Hindi films during the 1990s' economic liberalization (Mridha). Mainstream Hindi cinema saw tremendous transformation in the 1990s. Old storylines were reinvented, and higher production budgets made it possible to create slicker-looking motion pictures that better suited the preferences of the newly developing affluent strata and non-resident viewership, who constituted the bulk of spectators in the 1990s and the ensuing decades. Bollywood's dominant culture made sure that no additional culture was adequately explored and that inaccurate portrayals that 'othered' an ethnic group were displayed for viewers to see.

Representation of the Modern Bengali Feminine in Bengali Productions

The portrayal of both men and women in Indian television and film has traditionally been marked by conventional and stereotypical depictions, though recent years have witnessed a shift away from these norms. Gender roles in Indian television productions tend to be more polarized, associating femininity with qualities like sentimentality, caution, cooperation, a sense of belonging, and obedience. Conversely, masculinity is often linked to rationality, efficiency, competitiveness, individuality, and ruthlessness. Heroes in television and film symbolize virtue, strength, leadership, self-assuredness, capability, and success, exemplifying their readiness to excel in a competitive economic landscape.

Both modern Indian soap operas and Western action films often feature violent male role models, catering to a predominantly female audience. Indian daily soap operas construct the feminine ideal by encompassing the roles of 'daughter-sister-wife' and the virtuous 'girl-woman.' Mainstream soap-style femininity may manifest in simple attire or glamorous party wear, depending on the character's context, but the underlying narratives consistently reinforce the idea of women coping with challenges while retaining their feminine allure. In India, it's not uncommon for families to expect daughters-in-law to sacrifice elements of their personality, reputation, and values. For a considerable time, Indian television has depicted a girl or woman undergoing a kind of 'metamorphosis' upon marriage, where she is expected to transform into a different persona altogether.

The leading ladies in Bengali soap operas are often cast in the role of the 'ma' or mother, paying homage to Ma Durga and emphasizing the prevalent elements of deification used to portray "hyper-feminine/feminist" vigour in Bengali tradition. Simultaneously, the "Westernized/glamorized" and independent persona of the vamp is cultivated as the "hyper-modern anti-heroine." Bengali soap operas typically portray women according to the standards of the 'bhodromohila,' the feminine counterpart to the traditional Bengali 'bhodrolok,' known for his literary pursuits, refined tastes, and civility.

The 'Troublemaking' Modern Bengali Feminine in Hindi Productions

Indian society often stigmatizes non-conformists as 'troublemakers.' The progression of women's status garnered significant attention during the nineteenth-century socio-religious movements, partly driven by the British imperial administration's interaction with Indian culture. In the Bengal presidency, the purdah system was gradually lifted, and a few pioneering women, such as Kadambini Ganguly and Kumudini Khastagir, ventured into roles outside their homes.

Debates have revolved around the intention of this movement, with some arguing that it aimed not to establish women's independence or equality with men in public and private life but rather to equip them as better mothers and wives to support their husbands in a colonial context. The ideal 'modern' Bengali feminine figure often drew inspiration from a Victorian English woman adorned with traditional Indian attributes, a notion that challenged the broader Indian society still acclimating to Western education, scientific ideas, and radical concepts like liberty, equality, and fraternity. This perception of Bengali women as 'too liberated' or 'notorious' has filtered down and manifested itself in Hindi cinema.

An intriguing case in point is Dibakar Banerjee's *Detective Byomkesh Bakshi*, featuring the late Sushant Singh Rajput. What makes it particularly fascinating is Banerjee's attempt, as a Bengali himself, to adopt a Bond-like aesthetic for his film, inadvertently leading to the caricature and pigeonholing of the female characters. Byomkesh is portrayed consuming heroin, displaying flashy martial arts moves, and fixating on a Bengali woman. This Bengali woman epitomizes the term "oposhonskriti," Bengali for 'uncultured.' In a teaser, an actress routinely undresses in front of Byomkesh, smoking, conversing with him while bathing in a tub with full makeup, and appearing to spell doom for the detective.

Perhaps the closest portrayal of the urban, educated Bengali woman came in Shoojit Sircar's *Vicky Donor*, embodied by Yami Gautam. However, even here, there was a

problematic emphasis on the Bengali family's strong aversion to all things North Indian and their irrational passion for fish and football. Similarly, the Punjabi mother in the movie had her own set of grievances, characterizing Bengali women as 'domineering' and obsessively controlling their husbands' clothing and diet.

Hindi Productions and the 'Homewrecking' Bengali Woman

Another common and rather favoured trope in Hindi cinema, OTT platforms, and television productions when portraying modern Bengali women is that of the 'adulteress' or the 'homewrecker.' A notable and more light-hearted example of this can be found in the character of Babita Krishnan Iyer, portrayed by Munmun Dutta in Sony Productions' *Taarak Mehta ka Ooltah Chashmah*. This television program connected with an entire generation of Indian viewers, introducing many to the concept of 'mini-India' as coined by the Gokuldham society members. We're all acquainted with the dynamic between Jethalal and Babita ji, portrayed by Dilip Joshi and Munmun Dutta, respectively, on the show. In each episode, he repeatedly flirts with her, and she plays along, wearing a broad grin. What's concerning in this scenario is the portrayal of a married man's unwarranted obsession with another woman as 'innocent flirting.' Not only does this crudely normalize adultery, but it also underscores the problematic depiction of Babita, who, owing to her appearance, Bengali background, and English-speaking abilities, is characterized as a seductress, seemingly ready to betray her scientist husband and consort with Jethalal. This troubling subplot has formed the central theme of numerous episodes in the show.

Arguably the most iconic example of the Bengali homewrecker archetype can be found in Urvashi Dholakia's character, Komolika, in Ekta Kapoor's *Kasauti Zindagi Kay*. This troublesome Bengali female stereotype has undergone several iterations over the years. Komolika is the seductress who captivates men with her elegantly draped taant sarees, an alluring beauty with enchanting eyes who skillfully employ her feminine charm to ensnare unsuspecting men. The term 'vamp' is commonly used to

depict villainous female adversaries in Indian television, and Komolika's persona fits this description. Vamps are often depicted as cunning, attractive, vengeful, greedy, and 'modern', in stark contrast to the ethical, traditional protagonist they oppose.

From 2001 to 2008, Urvashi Dholakia portrayed the role of Komolika throughout the show, vying for the love of the male protagonist, Anurag. She undeniably stood out as the most renowned and beloved television vamps of her era, evolving into a legendary benchmark for villains in Indian soap operas, embodying the over-the-top drama that characterized Indian television during that period. Her exaggerated Bengali appearance, complete with a prominent 'bindi' and vermilion in her hair parting, captivated the audience. She became the quintessential Bengali woman that everyone loved to despise.

Another example of this can be seen in the BBC adaptation of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. The narrative of the series encompasses a wide range of themes, from the complexities of interpersonal relationships and communal tensions to the Indian Land Reform Bill. As a historical drama, it aims to depict the multifaceted aspects of India in the 1940s and 1950s. However, the character of Lata's (the protagonist's) sister-in-law, Meenakshi (portrayed by Shahana), who is a Bengali, raises concerns. Historically, Bengali women, with the advent of education in India, have been known for their literacy and education. It feels both anecdotal and defamatory to depict her as a philandering wife who cheats on her husband, dominates and manipulates him, and is often inebriated. Meenakshi becomes the embodiment of the Bengali wife that author Vikram Seth portrays in his novel, incorporating various stereotypes that the rest of India holds about Bengalis. She is portrayed as avaricious, arrogant, flamboyant, and crafty. Similarly, her sister Kukoo is depicted as an indulged, theatrical adolescent who enjoys flirting with men, further perpetuating stereotypes about Bengali women.

The trope of Bengali women as adultresses and/or husband-stealers has some sociocultural foundations in regional folk songs as well. In many local Bhojpuri songs, Bengali females are frequently portrayed as seductresses and/or antagonists who seduce Biharimales. In these songs, the Bengali women practice black magic on the

men. Typically performed in the month of 'Saavan', a Kajri melody talks about Bengali women in the following manner:

“piya more gailen calcutta o rama, / bengalin bitiya kai dihali o
jadua/tohara ko debo bengalin daal bhari sonwa o rama, / chhod di na
hamro sajnawa o rama!”

In this melody, a man has travelled to Kolkata, presumably for business purposes, and has fallen in love with a Bengali woman there. The woman is approached by the man's family, who urge her to forsake the man and accept their offer of gold instead. According to Professor Badri Narayan, a social scientist and an expert in local folklore, “Kolkata is a symbol for migration in these songs”. Many of the songs performed by the women who were left behind indicate that the indentured migrants were transported through Kolkata Port.

Kolkata's significance in these songs stems from its status as the colonial-era capital, and the fact that Bihar was part of the Bengal Presidency until 1912. Consequently, both professionals and students from the region travelled to Kolkata in substantial numbers. However, the larger, unwitting audience consuming this content often remains unaware of the historical origins of such representations. Instead, they tend to link these stereotypes to the individuals they encounter in real life.

The Modern Bengali 'Witch' in Hindi Motion Pictures

Concerning the comparison of Bengali women with witches, a feminist reading of Shakespeare's three witches from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is called into question. A courageous and honest man is transformed into a power-seeking traitor who compromises his friends and his nation, making the three witches a physical embodiment of unadulterated evil. However, the period context of the play offers the witches a new and more sympathetic perspective, and by modern standards, it is conceivable to perceive them as representations of the discrimination and sexism that women faced in the seventeenth century. One is inclined to believe that these witches weren't witches at all, they were just women who did not fit in. They were educated, innovative, and unwilling to accept the oppressive economic and social restrictions

imposed on their sex – much in line with how Bengali women were one of the first groups of women to achieve intellectual and economic independence in this country. It is therefore unsurprising that other communities feel threatened by this act of progress and resort to harmful labelling as an act of humiliation.

An example from Bollywood, *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2* (2022), showcases the stark contrast between Bengali women. Two sisters take center-stage — one epitomizes the obedient daughter, while the other is a rival sibling who employs black magic to achieve her goals. A young man becomes entangled in their competition for his affection. Watching this film, it's impossible not to ponder when the age-old stereotype of women being categorized as either good or bad, bold or demure, will finally cease.

However, deeper issues surround this movie that warrant attention. Rhea Chakraborty, the former girlfriend of the late Sushant Singh Rajput, found herself amid controversy in 2020 following his tragic suicide. Unfounded claims emerged that she used black magic to control him, fuelled by pure speculation without any evidence. Regrettably, this unfounded claim triggered social media to cast Bengali women in a negative light. Many individuals criticized this stereotype on social networking platforms, but no one was held accountable for the distress and harm it caused to Bengali women.

It is in this atmosphere that in the realm of both horror and comedy, a highly popular Bollywood film franchise has shamelessly perpetuated this stereotype. The damage inflicted by comedies that present themselves as light-hearted, such as *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2*, is substantial. These films entertain audiences by perpetuating stereotypes that are not meant to be taken seriously. However, it's essential to recognize that these portrayals linger in the minds of viewers, often surfacing in conversations and influencing how we perceive individuals. They can also impact our behaviour towards those individuals.

Conclusion

The awful lack of research into Bengal's rich and varied history and culture is extremely obvious in the way Bengal is represented in Hindi cinema, OTT, and soap operas; bringing to the surface the 'North-Indianization' of a culture that brought about an academic and cultural revolution in India. While this paper aims to explain

the reason behind each caricatured trope of the Bengali woman in Hindi cinema, OTT, and television shows, this offensive representation of Bengali women must end because it puts them in danger and, among other things, incites hostility, abuse, and trolling on social media. The best course of action is to call out such pop-culture references and campaign for proper representation of the culture and its people in mainstream cinema.

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