

‘Angry Young Women’: Evolving Forms of Female Resistance in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of select female characters from two contemporary Hindi films—*Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) and *Gully Boy* (2019)—to trace the emergence of the ‘angry young woman’ archetype within the broader framework of contemporary Indian cinema. The protagonists in these films confront their marginalisation across multiple intersecting axes—class, religion, and gender. Through nuanced roles, they navigate their personal and political struggles, breaking traditional norms by expressing anger, both violent and silent, as forms of resistance. This shift marks a departure from the stereotypical portrayals of women in earlier Bollywood films, where they were relegated to roles of victims, damsels in distress, or moral custodians of Indian values. The paper focuses on how female characters in recent Bollywood films deploy anger not only to challenge or subvert patriarchal structures but also as a tool for asserting new forms of agency and autonomy. This evolving depiction of anger signals a broader reconfiguration of female empowerment, where rage becomes a means of self-expression, identity formation, and personal liberation.

Keywords. Anger, Bollywood, women, resistance, marginalisation, agency

Introduction

Indian cinema has played a pivotal role in shaping national identity and reinforcing cultural values since its inception.¹ The representation of women has been equally integral to this process, with their portrayals evolving alongside shifts in both the film industry and the society it reflects. Mehboob Khan’s nationalist epic *Mother India* stands as a significant example from the post-independence era, where the character of Radha (played by actress Nargis) became emblematic of the morally virtuous, sacrificial, and patriotic Indian woman.² For many years, Radha symbolised a cultural archetype of Indian womanhood, aligning with what Leela Rao categorises

¹ Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987* (University of Texas Press, 1993), <https://doi.org/10.7560/755512>.

² Mehboob Khan, Director, *Mother India* (Mehboob Productions, 1957), 2h 47m.

as the 'era of silent heroines.'³ In her paper, 'Woman in Indian Films—A Paradigm of Continuity and Change,' Rao posits that this construction was influenced by Hindu theology, which draws a sharp distinction between the 'divine nurturing feminine' and the 'powerful protective masculine.'⁴ Female characters during this period were often relegated to traditional roles—daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, widow, or the 'other' woman (frequently portrayed as a vamp, courtesan, or fallen woman). Furthermore, the overarching representation of women in Indian cinema, particularly in popular Bollywood, has been largely dominated by masculine ideals—valorising the male hero and objectifying the female figure through tropes of physical aggression and muscularity.

By the late 1960s, Bollywood's nationalistic idealism began to wane, making way for more realistic portrayals of women, albeit still framed within limiting stereotypes. Female characters of this period were often confined to dichotomies: the 'damsel in distress' or the 'vamp.'⁵ The damsel trope, representing a virtuous yet helpless woman requiring male rescue, reduced the heroine's role to that of a romantic accessory, serving only to highlight the male protagonist's heroism.⁶ Examples such as *Jai Santoshi Maa* and *Seeta Aur Geeta* demonstrate how the damsel archetype remained dominant throughout the 1970s and into the 1990s.⁷ This was a period of political upheaval, marked by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's declaration of the Emergency (1975–77), which saw the suspension of civil liberties and increased censorship. The uncertainty of this time is perhaps mirrored in the film industry's regressive portrayals of women as traditional, submissive figures who upheld 'Indianness' and moral values.⁸

Scholars have extensively examined how Indian films intersect with issues of national history and identity. Sumita Chakravarty's *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987*, for example, unpacks the complex ways in which the gendered body has been entwined with the Indian nation-state through Bollywood.⁹ Chakravarty employs a critical reading of cinema as 'impersonation' and 'masquerade,' suggesting that Hindi cinema constructs a unique national identity by drawing upon Hindu philosophical and religious principles. In a similar vein,

³ Leela Rao, 'Woman in Indian Films: A Paradigm of Continuity and Change,' *Media, Culture & Society* 11, no. 4 (1989): 445, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344389011004007>.

⁴ Rao, 'Woman in Indian Films,' 447.

⁵ Indubala Singh, *Gender Relations and Cultural Ideology in Indian Cinema: A Study of Select Adaptations of Literary Texts* (Deep and Deep Publications, 2007), 14; Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora, 'Introduction,' in *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, ed. Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 6–9. <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978814486-001>.

⁶ Veeru Devgan, 'Stunts and Actions; Spectacular Skill and Daring,' in *Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema*, ed. Gulzar, Govind Nihalani, and Saibal Chatterjee (Popular Prakashan, 2003), 209.

⁷ Vijay Sharma, Director, *Jai Santoshi Maa* (Bhagyalakshmi Chitra Mandir, 1975), 2h 25m; Ramesh Sippy, Director, *Seeta Aur Geeta* (NH Studioz, 1972), 2h 42m; Keertana Sastry, 'Comparing Bollywood's Portrayal of Women from Past to Present,' *India.com*, May 2015, <https://www.india.com/entertainment/comparing-bollywoods-portrayal-of-women-from-past-to-present-164384/>.

⁸ Salva Mubarak, 'How Leading Roles for Women in Bollywood Have Evolved over the Years,' *Vogue India*, March 2019, <https://www.vogue.in/content/how-leading-roles-for-women-female-actors-in-bollywood-movies-have-evolved-over-the-years-kangana-ranaut-queen-sridevi-chandni>.

⁹ Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema*.

Jyotika Viridi's *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, traces discursive shifts in Hindi cinema to highlight how Bollywood reflects and shapes the popular imagination of the Indian nation.¹⁰ Viridi deconstructs the notion of 'nation' itself, presenting it as an evolving, contingent, and unfixed framework, rather than a static concept rooted in ethnicity, religion, or territory.¹¹

Rao categorises the 'damsel' within the second era of cinematic portrayal, referring to it as the 'dream girl' phase—a period shaped by India's transition from colonial subjugation to independence. Thematically, films shifted from mythology to social and political causes but remained centred around the figure of the sacrificial mother or wife. Rao argues that this gave rise to the *devi* archetype, an idealised woman imbued with divine qualities tasked with upholding familial and cultural honour. Her deification rendered discussions of her individual identity irrelevant, as she was constructed as the perfect dream girl for audiences, unburdened by human imperfection.¹² This cultural fixation on the mother figure as a symbol of national identity gained traction in the nineteenth century and became a recurring motif in Indian cinema as a mechanism to simplify complex discourses around nationhood. As Viridi explained:

The symbolic image of the traditional Indian woman in Hindi film could well project a wishful desire to unite the nation around the figure of the woman, while repressing debates on identity and community which have propagated patriarchal laws signifying 'difference' in the name of cultural diversity. To use woman to represent the entire nation blurs the boundaries contested by different communities. [W]omen's interests have been sacrificed at the altar of national unity. Post-independence Hindi cinema denies communal differences by using the woman as a sign—a wishful desire for a utopian unified nation.¹³

The introduction of commercialised song-and-dance sequences in Bollywood further complicated the image of women. The pure, *devi*-like heroine gave way to the hypersexualised 'vamp'—a figure distinct from the morally virtuous woman. The vamp, often occupying the illicit spaces of casinos and nightclubs, served as a seductive contrast to the hero's rugged masculinity,¹⁴ this trope became widespread in films from the late 1950s to the 1980s, and while it reflected changing attitudes toward women, it simultaneously reinforced objectification by positioning female sexuality as threatening or corrupt.¹⁵ Interestingly, the vamp archetype faded from Bollywood after the 1980s, replaced by the 'avenging woman.' Popular cinema of the 1980s began to depict women as more aggressive, although these portrayals were often superficial and failed to resonate with feminist ideologies.¹⁶ Lalitha Gopalan observes that the avenging woman genre emerged from a tension between the industry's desire to exploit female bodies for a range

¹⁰ Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (Rutgers University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination*, xiv.

¹² Rao, 'Woman in Indian Films,' 450.

¹³ Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination*, 72.

¹⁴ Rao, 'Woman in Indian Films,' 452.

¹⁵ Ranjani Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 86.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15405700903251662>.

¹⁶ Maithili Rao, 'Victims in Vigilante Clothing,' *Cinema in India*, October—December 1988, 28.

of representations and the Censor Board's dictates on obscenity, resulting in a provocative blend of sex and violence.¹⁷ These films, fuelled by women's rage and narratives of rape and revenge, invoked images of power and coercion, but still fell short of offering a substantive critique of patriarchy.¹⁸

Post the 1980s and 1990s, the rigid dichotomies that previously defined Bollywood's gender narratives gradually began to erode, largely due to the significant paradigm shift in India's socio-economic and political landscape. The advent of liberalisation catalysed the centralisation of film production in Mumbai, the country's commercial capital. This influx of financial capital expanded distribution networks globally, heralding the era of 'New Bollywood.' This seismic transformation reshaped the priorities and sensibilities of writers, producers, and actors, driving the adoption of so-called 'modern' themes, plotlines, and characterisations that departed from the formulaic constraints of earlier Bollywood. These changes propagated the neoliberal values of post-1990s India, as detailed in Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora's edited book *Bollywood's New Woman* ¹⁹. In the Introduction to this book, Anwer and Arora underscore how this cinematic evolution had profound implications for female representation.

[The] elimination of the categorical villainy (a staple of post-liberalization cinema) has gone hand in hand with the 'gradual disappearance' of the vamp whose glamorous and overt eroticism, now duly aestheticized and sweetened up, gets incorporated with the attributes of the film's heroine. Consequently, the components of what was once an externalized dichotomy—an irreconcilable moral split in qualities that could not coexist within a single character—are now internalized and fused within the identity of the film's 'female lead' (a morally neutral term that gradually replaces 'heroine' in Bollywood buzz), with the result that she is now expected to be simultaneously 'chaste and sexy.' This, in a sense, becomes the possible point of entry for the emergence of the new woman.²⁰

The 'New Woman,' however, remains far from fully liberated. She precariously occupies the fragile intersection between tradition and modernity, with her liminal characterisation merging previously rigid dichotomies, thus becoming an even more complex site of representation, contestation, and resistance. She is now burdened with the responsibility of embodying and reconciling multiple, often contradictory, expectations—she must simultaneously represent the sacrificial mother, the obedient wife, the assertive yet compassionate working woman, the justified anger of the wronged or avenging woman, and the sensuality of the item girl or courtesan.²¹ Examples of such intricate, female-driven films from the 2000s onwards include *Lajja*, *Chandni Bar*, *Devdas*, *Jism*, *Chameli*, *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag*,

¹⁷ Lalitha Gopalan, 'Avenging Women in Indian Cinema,' *Screen* 38, no. 1 (1997): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/38.1.42>.

¹⁸ Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination*, 208.

¹⁹ *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, edited by Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978814486>.

²⁰ Anwer and Arora, 'Introduction,' 8-9.

²¹ Anwer and Arora, 'Introduction,' 19.

Fashion, *Ishqiya*, among others.²² These films do not merely reflect shifts in narrative trends but serve as cultural texts that navigate the complexities of a modernising society where traditional gender roles persist in tension with emerging feminist discourses.

The last decade and a half of Bollywood (2010 onwards) has witnessed a significant transformation in the representation of women, marked by a substantial rise in female-centric films, including genres like female cop dramas and female-buddy films. These narratives foreground characters displaying renewed forms of individuality and agency. Bollywood has increasingly offered films that either explore contemporary feminist ideas or portray the lived experiences of modern women on screen. Biopics and sports films centred on the lives of prominent female figures have also found notable success at the box office, reflecting audiences' growing appetite for stories that shed light on historically overlooked women. A few noteworthy examples include *The Dirty Picture*, *Kahaani*, *English Vinglish*, *Queen*, *Mary Kom*, *Mardaani*, *Parched*, *Margarita with a Straw*, and *Pink*, among others.²³ In her essay 'Lethal Acts: Bollywood's New Woman and the Nirbhaya Effect,' Sangita Gopal examines what she terms women-centred 'take-action' films (*NH10*, 2015; *Titli*, 2014).²⁴ Women in these films are confronted with 'contingencies beyond their control and they are fuelled by the desire for self-assertion.'²⁵ Their actions, while swift and decisive, often prove destructive to both them and society. These actions are not always calculated nor are the actors always conscious of the long-term consequences. Furthermore, they do not always align neatly with feminist ideologies. Instead, they may be seen as political acts. Such films offer a bleak portrayal of the limited choices available to women within the context of neoliberal globalisation. Gopal contends that these films are shaped by the socio-political context of the Nirbhaya rape case (a reference to the 2012 New Delhi rape incident).²⁶ The emergence of the 'violent femme' and the 'femme fatale' in these

²² Rajkumar Santoshi, Director, *Lajja* (Rajkumar Santoshi Productions, 2001), 3h 22m; Madhur Bhandarkar, Director, *Chandni Bar* (Lata Mohan, 2001), 2h 30m; Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Director, *Devdas* (Mega Bollywood, 2002), 3h 5m, 3h 5m; Amit Saxena, Director, *Jism* (Fish Eye Network, 2003), 2h 16m; Sudhir Mishra, Director, *Chameli* (Pritish Nandy Communications, 2003), 1h 48m, 1h 48m; Pradeep Sarkar, Director, *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag* (Yash Raj Films, 2007), 2h 17m; Madhur Bhandarkar, Director, *Fashion* (UTV Motion Pictures, 2008), 2h 47m; Abhishek Chaubey, Director, *Ishqiya* (Vishal Bhardwaj Pictures, 2010), 1h 58m.

²³ Milan Luthria, Director, *The Dirty Picture* (Balaji Motion Pictures, 2011), 2h 24m; Sujoy Ghosh, Director, *Kahaani* (Boundscript, 2012), 2h 2m; Gauri Shinde, Director, *English Vinglish* (Hope Productions, 2012), 2h 14m; Vikas Bahl, Director, *Queen* (Phantom Films and Viacom18 Motion Pictures, 2014), 2h 26m; Omung Kumar, Director, *Mary Kom* (Bhansali Productions, 2014), 2h 2m; Pradeep Sarkar, Director, *Mardaani* (Yash Raj Films, 2014), 1h 53m; Leena Yadav, Director, *Parched* (Ajay Devgn Films, 2016), 1h 58m; Shonali Bose, Director, *Margarita with a Straw* (Viacom18 Motion Pictures, 2015), 2h 20m; Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, Director, *Pink* (Rising Sun Films, 2016), 2h 16m.

²⁴ Navdeep Singh, Director, *NH10* (Phantom Films and Clean Slate Films, 2015), 1h 55m; Kanu Behl, Director, *Titli* (Yash Raj Films and Dibakar Banerjee Productions, 2014), 2h 2m.

²⁵ Sangita Gopal, 'Lethal Acts: Bollywood's New Woman and the Nirbhaya Effect,' in *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, ed. Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora (Rutgers University Press, 2021), 157–78.

²⁶ Rhythma Kaul, 'Rape Victim Still Critical, Writes to Mother 'I Want to Live,' *Hindustan Times*, December 20, 2012, archived at the Wayback Machine,

films, as well as their explorations of gender, are responses to increased violence against women and feminist frameworks that emerged in its aftermath. These films grapple with how feminist agency and activism are complicated by the harsh realities of a deeply patriarchal and neoliberal society. Gopal concludes that ‘though constantly threatened and betrayed by a precarious social world ordered by toxic masculinity, these women are neither victims nor heroes but testify rather to stagings of agency that foreclose the political future of feminism.’²⁷

In line with the transformative shifts in the portrayal of women in Bollywood, we seek to critically examine the female protagonists of two contemporary Hindi films—*Lipstick Under My Burkha*²⁸ and *Gully Boy*²⁹—to trace the evolving archetype of the ‘angry young woman’ within the broader landscape of contemporary Indian cinema. The protagonists of these films navigate their marginalisation on multiple fronts, including class, religion, and gender. These women confront personal and political dilemmas through roles that are both nuanced and subversive, breaking traditional cinematic norms through their expressions of anger as a form of resistance. This portrayal challenges the conventional Bollywood stereotypes of women as passive victims, damsels in distress, upholders of Indian morality, or seductive vamps.

In this paper, we primarily explore how the female characters in these recent Bollywood films use anger to articulate new forms of agency and self-expression. Within the historical context of shifting female representations in Bollywood, we investigate these emerging expressions of onscreen anger, which not only challenge patriarchy but also seem to take on a more individualistic, empowering role for women in Bollywood. The characters’ anger no longer functions solely as a response to external oppression but as a powerful, self-directed tool for redefining their identities and asserting their autonomy in an evolving social landscape.

‘Danger *aapa*’: Safeena’s violence as anger

Authentic and nuanced female characters have predominantly existed in female-centred, low-budget, art-house films that, while critically acclaimed, have failed to attract the wide audience of mainstream cinema. Examples of such films include *Ankur*, *Arth*, *Mirch Masala*, *Fire* and *Astitva*.³⁰ Despite the emergence of the ‘New Woman’ in Bollywood in recent years, only a limited number of commercially successful, female-oriented films—such as *Angry Indian Goddesses*, *Parched*, *Pink*, and *Sonata*³¹—have managed to break through and capture public

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121231003459/http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/NewDelhi/Delhi-gang-rape-victim-writes-on-a-piece-of-paper-Mother-I-want-to-live/Article1-976798.aspx>.

²⁷ Gopal, ‘Lethal Acts,’ 42.

²⁸ Alankrita Shrivastava, Director, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (Prakash Jha Productions, 2016), 2h 12m.

²⁹ Zoya Akhtar, Director, *Gully Boy* (Tiger Baby Films and Excel Entertainment, 2019), 2h 28m.

³⁰ Shyam Benegal, Director, *Ankur* (Blaze Film Enterprises, 1974), 2h 5m; Mahesh Bhatt, Director, *Arth* (Anu Arts, 1982), 2h 18m; Ketan Mehta, Director, *Mirch Masala* (National Film Development Corporation of India, 1987), 2h 8m; Deepa Mehta, Director, *Fire* (Hamilton–Mehta Productions, 1996), 1h 44m; Mahesh Manjrekar, Director, *Astitva* (Friends India, 2000), 1h 49m.

³¹ Pan Nalin, Director, *Angry Indian Goddesses* (Jungle Book Entertainment, 2015), 1h 55m; Yadav, *Parched*; Chowdhury, *Pink*; Aparna Sen, Director, *Sonata* (HK Studios, 2017), 1h 43m.

attention. Almost all these films, including the two selected for this study, are written and directed by women. They delve deeply into women's multifaceted lives, exploring not only their external struggles but also their inner worlds, their fears, and their desires, often through the lens of friendship and camaraderie.³² This focus on female bonds offers a powerful counterpoint to the male-centric narratives that dominate Bollywood, providing women with a collective space from which to articulate their resistance, resilience, and solidarity. Such films not only contribute to the gradual transformation of gender roles onscreen but also challenge societal norms by foregrounding women's lived experiences and emotional complexities.

Written and directed by Zoya Akhtar, *Gully Boy*, narrates the journey of Murad Ahmed, an aspiring street rapper from the slums of Dharavi. The film chronicles his struggles with poverty, an abusive father, familial obligations, and his unwavering passion for rap. While *Gully Boy* is not primarily a female-centric narrative, it offers a groundbreaking, stereotype-defying character in Safeena Firdousi. We examine the character of Safeena, Murad's childhood friend and girlfriend, who is portrayed as a hijab-wearing medical student training to become a surgeon. Nicknamed 'Danger Aapa' (translated as 'danger woman/sister') by Murad due to her volatile temperament, Safeena deftly manipulates her conservative parents by maintaining an innocent 'damsel in distress' persona, enabling her to subvert their authority and navigate the restrictions placed upon her. Safeena, though wealthier than Murad, serves as his strongest supporter and guide, demonstrating a complex power dynamic within their relationship. She is fiercely possessive of Murad and easily triggered by any perceived threats to their bond. Safeena and Murad's relationship challenges traditional Bollywood depictions of heteronormative partnerships, where the male is often portrayed as the 'macho' protector of a demure, submissive girlfriend. In *Gully Boy*, however, Safeena frequently asserts verbal and physical dominance over Murad and assumes the role of primary decision-maker in their relationship.³³

Safeena's anger can be compared to the trope of the 'angry young man' popularised by Amitabh Bachchan's portrayal of Vijay in *Zanjeer*, and later films such as *Deewaar*, *Trishul*, and *Shakti*.³⁴ Unlike earlier romantic heroes like Rajesh Khanna, Dev Anand, or Dilip Kumar, the 'angry young man' is not characterised by sentimentality or romance. Instead, his emotions are channelled into a hard-edged, often violent pursuit of justice, revenge, or redemption. While he

³² Anubha Yadav, 'Lipstick Under My Burkha: When Real Women Take Over Indian Screens,' *The Conversation*, June 2017, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAL.6n5an3nvx>.

³³ Sonali Kokra, 'Alia Bhatt's Safeena from *Gully Boy* Is the Angry Young Woman Bollywood Desperately Needs,' *Firstpost*, February 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/alicia-bhatt-s-safeena-from-gully-boy-is-the-angry-young-woman-bollywood-desperately-needs-6127891.html>.

³⁴ Prakash Mehra, Director, *Zanjeer* (Prakash Mehra Productions, 1973), 2h 25m; Yash Chopra, Director, *Deewaar* (Trimurti Films, 1975), 2h 54m; Yash Chopra, Director, *Trishul* (Trimurti Films, 1978), 2h 47m; Ramesh Sippy, Director, *Shakti* (M.R. Productions, 1982), 2h 46m; Ayaz Shaikh, 'The Making of Amitabh Bachchan: How *Zanjeer* Helped Big B Become a Star,' *The Indian Express*, October 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/making-of-amitabh-bachchan-how-zanjeer-helped-big-b-become-a-star-77-birthday-6060457/>; Sampada Sharma, 'Films, People Who Made Amitabh Bachchan a Superstar: The "Angry Young Man" Who Defined the 1970s,' *The Indian Express*, October 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/amitabh-bachchan-birthday-films-and-people-who-created-vijay-angry-young-man-7559984/>.

upholds traditional morals and Indian values, he is unafraid to cross social boundaries in his quest for what he perceives as moral righteousness.³⁵ Similarly, Safeena is unhesitant in resorting to physical or verbal violence to assert her agency or ensure her safety. In this context, Safeena's anger can be examined through the lens of affect theory, particularly the work of Silvan Tomkins. Affect theory suggests that emotions, or 'affects,' are the primary motivators of human behaviour, often preceding cognition. Safeena's violent outbursts can be understood as an outward expression of the negative affect of anger, which acts as a galvanising force driving her actions. Tomkins' theory emphasises that anger, as a powerful affect, can disrupt social norms and expectations, leading to behaviours that are seen as deviant or transgressive but are rooted in the individual's internal need for self-expression and autonomy.³⁶

Safeena's anger, however, cannot be reduced to a simplistic notion of uncontrollable rage; it is a strategic tool she uses to navigate the constraints placed upon her by a patriarchal society. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed,³⁷ who explores the politics of emotion, Safeena's anger becomes a form of resistance—one that challenges the social norms that seek to control her.³⁸ Ahmed's concept of the 'feminist killjoy' is useful here,³⁹ as Safeena embodies a woman whose anger is not simply reactive but a deliberate disruption of the structures that attempt to silence her desires and autonomy. Moreover, Safeena's use of anger can be connected to Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism,' where the object of desire (Murad, in this case) represents a form of attachment that both sustains and endangers her.⁴⁰ Safeena's violent outbursts, then, are not only expressions of her affective state but also reflections of the ambivalence that defines her relationship with the world around her—where the very things that bring her joy and security are also the sources of her anger and frustration. This complex interplay between emotion, power, and resistance constructs Safeena as a deeply nuanced character, whose actions, though violent, are charged with affective intensity and sociopolitical significance.

The 'angry young man' character is emblematic of the so-called common man of India during the 1970s, whose ideal vision of a morally upright life is crumbling due to a system that is stacked against him. To regain control of his narrative and rectify the injustices inflicted upon him, this character must abandon conventional notions of law and order, adopting instead unconventional, often extra-legal, methods. He harbours deep resentment toward societal evils and carries with him a pervasive sense of existential, moral, and social angst. Although driven by anger, he channels this emotion in ways that make his actions seem justifiable, at least in the eyes of the audience. These characteristics made him highly relatable to the masses, contributing to the immense popularity of the archetype. As Ayaz Shaikh explains in 'The Making of Amitabh

³⁵ Entertainment Desk, 'Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man" Was Created Only by Salim Khan: "Javed Akhtar Wasn't My Partner When I Wrote Zanjeer",' *The Indian Express*, October 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/amitabh-bachchans-angry-young-man-was-conceptualized-by-salim-khan-javed-akhtar-wasnt-my-partner-when-i-wrote-zanjeer-7577990/>.

³⁶ Silvan Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: Volume I: The Positive Affects* (Springer Publishing, 1962), 498.

³⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 174–75.

³⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011). <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394716>.

³⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way* (Basic Books, 2023).

⁴⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

Bachchan: How Zanjeer Helped Big B Become a Star,’ the ‘Angry Young Man’ became the avowed atheist anti-hero, whose timely vigilantism emerged as a direct antithesis to the romanticised, singing-dancing lover-boys like Rajesh Khanna who had previously dominated Hindi cinema.⁴¹ The era of the ‘angry young man’ gradually declined toward the late 1980s, as the social and political milieu of the time underwent significant transformation. Nevertheless, the trope has not vanished entirely from Bollywood. Modern adaptations can still be observed in contemporary films such as *Singham* and *Raees*.⁴²

In contrast, Bollywood’s depiction of female anger, starting from the vengeful women of the 1980s and 1990s to the more recent representations analysed in this paper, must be interpreted through a different lens. Female anger has traditionally been portrayed as a reaction to gendered oppression, as opposed to the male manifestation, which is often depicted as a response to socio-economic persecution. While male protagonists fight against the systemic forces of society, such as poverty and class inequities, female anger in Bollywood is often directed toward ‘the man’—a symbolic representation of patriarchy. Men project their violence outward, engaging with external structures of power, whereas women’s anger has historically been shown as inward facing, consumed by domestic entrapments. In this context, it is crucial to examine how contemporary depictions of female anger, particularly within the framework of marginalised Indian Muslim households, offer a nuanced divergence from the traditional ‘angry young man’ trope. Female anger in these films is often rooted in the domestic sphere, where violence, revenge, and resistance take on more intimate and constrained forms. By analysing the chosen film texts, we seek to explore how female anger is expressed not only through physical violence but also through silence, psychological manipulation, and other modes of resistance. Such representations challenge the assumption that anger must always manifest outwardly in violent acts and suggest that female anger is multifaceted, often subtle, and deeply entrenched within the social limitations imposed on women in patriarchal societies.

Safeena’s on-screen outbursts of anger over perceived minor threats sparked controversy among critics and audiences alike. Many hailed her as a pioneering female anti-hero, celebrating her unapologetic portrayal of female agency, while others critiqued her problematic behaviour. Critic Sonali Kokra dubbed her the new ‘angry young woman’ in her article ‘Alia Bhatt’s Safeena from Gully Boy is the Angry Young Woman Bollywood Desperately Needs.’⁴³ According to Kokra, Safeena’s ‘anger issues, an irrepressible violent streak, and the ability to use her charm to manipulate those around her’ complicate the archetype of the rebellious spitfire that the hero must ultimately ‘tame’ with his love—an archetype with which Bollywood has long been enamoured.⁴⁴ Despite her problematic tendencies, Kokra argues that Safeena displays

⁴¹ Shaikh, ‘The Making of Amitabh Bachchan.’

⁴² Rohit Shetty, Director, *Singham* (Reliance Entertainment, 2011), 2h 22m; Rahul Dholakia, Director, *Raees* (Red Chillies Entertainment and Excel Entertainment, 2017), 2h 23m; Sharma, ‘Films, People Who Made Amitabh Bachchan.’

⁴³ Kokra, ‘Alia Bhatt’s Safeena from *Gully Boy*.’

⁴⁴ Kokra, ‘Alia Bhatt’s Safeena from *Gully Boy*.’

characteristics and affects that many Indian women identify with and have long sought in cinematic representation.⁴⁵

Two pivotal instances of Safeena's public outbursts of violence merit close analysis. In one scene, Safeena, already irritated while on a bus with Murad, discovers flirtatious messages from Albina, a mutual friend, on his phone. Instead of addressing the situation calmly, she storms off the bus and confronts Albina at her workplace. Safeena physically and verbally assaults Albina, her petite frame and veiled head contrasting sharply with her aggressive demeanour. She grabs Albina by the scruff of her neck, demanding she stop messaging Murad, which leads to a physical altercation between the two women—a fight that was separated by bystanders (Figure 1). The scene shifts to both women seated with their parents at Safeena's father's clinic, where her father administers first aid to Albina. Safeena, lying convincingly, claims Albina assaulted her first and denies knowing Murad, skilfully manipulating the situation to her advantage. It is crucial to note here that Murad later condemns Safeena for her behaviour, prompting a grudging apology. Safeena justifies her actions as motivated by love, not jealousy. Unlike Amitabh Bachchan's 'angry young man,' who is typically absolved of consequences and often celebrated for his violent outbursts, Safeena is shamed for engaging in such 'unfeminine' methods of confrontation. Although she apologises, director Zoya Akhtar deliberately leaves the narrative open to interpretation. When Murad asks Safeena to promise never to repeat such violence, she refuses, quipping that swearing on his name might cause him to die—suggesting that this is unlikely to be her last outburst, despite the potential repercussions.



Figure 1: Bystanders holding Safeena back from physically assaulting Albina.
Source. Zoya, *Gully Boy*, 20:05.

The second instance of Safeena's violent behaviour unfolds in a restaurant when she learns of Murad's alleged affair with Sky, a music student. Despite her initial attempts to fit in with Murad's wealthy friends by adopting a demure, quiet demeanour, her rage surfaces once more. Confronting Murad rather than Sky, Safeena accuses him of betrayal. Murad, anxious to

⁴⁵ Kokra, 'Alia Bhatt's Safeena from *Gully Boy*.'

avoid public embarrassment, tries to calm her, but the situation escalates when Safeena smashes a glass bottle on Sky's head. The scene shifts to the police station, where Sky declines to press charges, even as Safeena remains visibly enraged. Later, during a phone conversation with Murad, Safeena's anger intensifies when he calls her a 'psycho' and tries to break up with her. Safeena apologises once more, albeit defensively, maintaining that her actions were justified in light of his betrayal. She warns him against gaslighting her, but Murad insists he can no longer continue the relationship due to her anger issues. Safeena's fear of losing Murad ultimately outweighs her anger, and as she abruptly ends the call, her fury transforms into heartbreak, leaving her sobbing in solitude (Figure 2). For Safeena, Murad represents more than just romantic love; he is her escape from a repressive, restrictive life.



Figure 2: Safeena's anger turns into sadness after Murad breaks up with her.
Source. Zoya, *Gully Boy*, 1:32:37.

What is particularly striking is that Safeena's violent outbursts are directed exclusively toward other women. Toward Murad, her parents, and other male figures, her anger manifests through subtler, less overtly violent means, such as lying, emotional manipulation, playing the victim, and gaslighting. This gendered differentiation in the expression of anger is significant, as it underscores the complex dynamics of power and control within her relationships. Critics like Rajvi Desai raise concerns about the lack of accountability Safeena seems to evade, owing to her marginal status as a Muslim woman. Desai cautions against normalising such virulent behaviour, regardless of gender, and argues that Bollywood should move beyond the trope of holding women to higher moral standards than men.⁴⁶ The film, however, remains ambiguous about the underlying reasons for Safeena's frequent resort to anger and aggression. Her excessive negative affect appears to stem from deeper frustrations, but these are left for the viewer to infer. Affect, in this context, is not simply an emotional state but a force that disrupts and propels. Safeena's outbursts, particularly in public spaces, are visceral expressions of an internalised frustration that

⁴⁶ Rajvi Desai, 'Gully Boy Subverts Some Gender Stereotypes, Reinforces Others,' *The Swaddle*, February 2019, <https://theswaddle.com/gully-boy-review-film-subverts-some-gender-stereotypes-reinforces-others/>.

cannot be contained through traditional channels of communication. Her reliance on physical and verbal aggression reflects an inability to mediate her emotional state within the societal norms imposed on her. Affect theory highlights how emotions like anger can disrupt the social order and become transgressive acts that challenge societal boundaries, especially for marginalised figures like Safeena. By channelling her anger through violent acts, Safeena not only reclaims a sense of agency but also externalises her resistance to the various forms of oppression she encounters as a young Muslim woman. This use of affect also underscores the limitations of conventional narratives of female anger, which tend to confine it to the private sphere; Safeena's anger spills into public spaces, making it a visible form of defiance.

It is also plausible that Safeena's life is already stifling, and she views Murad as her sole means of achieving freedom, reacting violently to perceived threats to this escape. As she tells Murad, 'You let me be me,' a declaration of love rooted in the sense that he provides her with the confidence and freedom that the rest of her life denies her.⁴⁷ Alternatively, Safeena's aggression may be understood as a response to the inauthentic life she is forced to lead. Performing the role of the stereotypically shy, small-town girl to maintain peace, her anger emerges as a rebellion against this inauthentic existence. Safeena's frustrations are also shaped by her marginalisation as a young Indian Muslim woman from a lower socioeconomic background, whose ambitions are constrained by societal expectations. Zeeshan Hussain argues that Safeena's 'eccentricities arise out of these insecurities ... Murad means so much to her because she does not need to wear the mask around him. He understands her dreams, and with Murad, she is free. This justifies the rage triggered by threats to her relationship. This even justifies her forgiving him for his moment of weakness with another woman.'⁴⁸

Shirin and Rehana's silence as resistance

Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* presents the intertwined stories of four women in the small town of Bhopal, each grappling with issues related to gender, sexuality, and the constraints imposed by patriarchal social norms. These narratives intersect as the women navigate small acts of rebellion within the restrictive frameworks of religion, class, and caste. The film opens with a voiceover by Usha Parmar, or Buaji, the elderly matriarch among the protagonists, who introduces Rosy, the heroine of an erotic novella she secretly reads. Buaji's narration of Rosy's sexual desires and longing for freedom parallels the unfolding visual narratives of the other women. Among them, Leela, a vibrant young Hindu woman who runs a beauty parlour, harbours dreams of escaping abroad with her Muslim lover. Despite the complexity of Leela's and Buaji's stories, the limited scope of this paper permits a detailed focus only on the two other protagonists: Rehana Abidi and Shirin Aslam.

⁴⁷ Xingting Gong, 'Review: *Gully Boy* Is a Modern, Nuanced Depiction of Class Struggle through Slum Life and Rap Music,' *Cinema Escapist*, April 2019, <https://www.cinemaescapist.com/2019/04/gully-boy/>.

⁴⁸ Zeeshan Hussain, 'Understanding the Stereotype-Defying Safeena Firdausi from *Gully Boy*,' *Voxspace*, February 2019, <https://www.voxspace.in/2019/02/24/understanding-safeena/>.

Shrivastava employs what Gohar Siddiqui terms ‘technologies of resistance and mobility’ in her choices related to storyline, character development, and mise-en-scène.⁴⁹ These narrative choices not only provide a framework for the characters’ individual journeys but also highlight how subtle acts of resistance—whether through sexual autonomy, economic independence, or defiance of societal roles—become revolutionary in spaces where women are systematically marginalised. The mise-en-scène, with its intricate interplay of domestic and public spaces, serves to underscore the tension between confinement and mobility, reflecting the physical and metaphorical boundaries each woman confronts in her pursuit of freedom. This cinematic approach underlines the subversive nature of everyday acts of defiance in the face of overwhelming societal control, offering a nuanced portrayal of the intersectional struggles of women in contemporary India.

Rehana, a young Muslim college student, is compelled to wear the full burkha as part of her daily life, a symbol of the constraints imposed upon her by both religion and family. Rehana’s existence is marked by duality: she leads a double life as the daughter of a burkha tailor—her father—who ironically forces her to participate in her own subjugation by making her cut and sew the very garment that she finds oppressive. Secretly, Rehana aspires to become a western pop star, idolising figures like Miley Cyrus. Her small room is adorned with posters of her western icons, but these are quickly hidden behind Islamic portraits when her parents are present, emphasising the bifurcation of her public and private selves. At home, she is suffocated by her religious and cultural obligations, whereas in college, she sheds her burkha and adopts a different persona—wearing jeans, dark lipstick, and fringe-cut hair—to fit in with her peers. However, she lacks access to the expensive cosmetics and fashionable clothing her classmates wear, owing to her economic, social, and religious limitations. In response, she begins to steal from mall shops, using her burkha to conceal her theft, walking out unnoticed due to her attire. Abhija Ghosh aptly notes,

The burkha, at once identifiable as the stereotyped mark of gendered conventions and traditions of a religious community, becomes a leitmotif in the film and draws women across religions under its metaphoric and material fold. On one hand, the film uses it, almost cheekily, as an incredible mode of social mobility, personal aspirations, and reversal of the male gaze.⁵⁰

The burkha, which Rehana initially perceives as a device of oppression, paradoxically becomes her tool for mobility and a symbol of her rebellion. While it limits her identity in one context, it grants her the freedom to navigate social spaces unnoticed, giving her access to the western lifestyle she so fervently desires. This dichotomy complicates her sartorial choices, raising critical questions about intersecting feminisms and the ways in which clothing can simultaneously oppress and empower. Here, Rehana’s subversion of the burkha aligns with

⁴⁹ Gohar Siddiqui, ‘New Womanhood and #LipstickRebellion: Feminist Consciousness in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*,’ in *Bollywood’s New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, ed. Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora (Rutgers University Press, 2021), 79, <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978814486-006>.

⁵⁰ Abhija Ghosh, ‘Curiosity, Consent and Desire in *Masaan* (2015), *Pink* (2016), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) and *Veere Di Wedding* (2018),’ in *‘Bad’ Women of Bombay Films*, ed. Saswati Sengupta, Shampa Roy, Sharmila Purkayastha (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 332. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26788-9_19.

theories of 'strategic essentialism'⁵¹ where marginalised individuals use essentialist identities for political or personal gain. The burkha, thus, becomes a site of resistance and agency, allowing Rehana to challenge both the male gaze and the socio-religious expectations imposed upon her. In this way, Shrivastava's portrayal of Rehana reflects the complex negotiations women in conservative settings must undertake to assert their autonomy, using the very symbols of their oppression as tools for subversive freedom.

Shirin, in contrast, is a middle-aged Muslim woman, a homemaker, and the mother of three sons. Her husband, Rahim, works in Saudi Arabia, returning home only for brief visits every few months. Despite her evident passion and talent, Shirin is prohibited from seeking employment outside the home. However, she adeptly utilises Rahim's absence to her advantage, secretly working as a door-to-door saleswoman without his knowledge. Her diligence and talent earn her considerable acclaim and a promotion at work, which she is eager to share with Rahim. Yet, despite her various attempts to communicate her success, he consistently dismisses her achievements. Rahim exhibits extreme aggression, misogyny, and abusiveness toward Shirin, often resorting to non-consensual sexual acts, thereby completely disregarding her autonomy and comfort. Shirin, not wanting to bear additional children, consumes contraceptives covertly, and it is implied that she has undergone several clandestine abortions. She perceives Rahim as incapable of love or tenderness; however, her disillusionment deepens upon discovering him romantically involved with another woman in a coffee shop. In stark contrast to his treatment of Shirin, Rahim is sweet and affectionate toward this new companion, even in public, which incites Shirin's fury. Shirin confronts the mistress at her home, masquerading as a saleswoman, but later suffers physical abuse and rape at Rahim's hands as punishment for her perceived betrayal.

Like Rehana, Shirin employs the burkha to navigate the oppressive environments she constantly inhabits. Although they both embody the ideals of 'modern women,' their economic and social resources are severely constrained. Their marginality fosters a resourcefulness that enables them to transform material and sartorial objects into 'tools [that] become polysemic and contradictory symbols of oppression and empowerment.'⁵² The oppressive garment is thus resemiotised within the film as a potent instrument of resistance against the pervasive patriarchal forces, allowing the women to carve out their individual paths to freedom. This duality in the representation of the burkha serves to critique the simplistic categorisation of women's garments as solely oppressive; rather, it highlights the complexity of women's agency within the confines of patriarchal structures.

Both Rehana and Shirin are depicted as embodying anger in response to the stifling and controlling lives they lead. Unlike Safeena in *Gully Boy*, they grapple with the challenge of articulating their anger and dissatisfaction due to fears of severe repercussions. Their affective state of anger finds expression in more covert forms. Psychologists, such as Ann Kring, have theorised that, unlike their male counterparts, women often lack the privilege of fully expressing anger, as it contravenes the archetype of the quiet, subjugated, and submissive female that

⁵¹ Mridula Nath Chakraborty, 'Everybody's Afraid of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Reading Interviews with the Public Intellectual and Postcolonial Critic,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 3 (March 2010): 622–23, <https://doi.org/10.1086/649575>.

⁵² Siddiqui, 'New Womanhood and #LipstickRebellion,' 84.

society compels women to embody.⁵³ Given their multiple layers of marginalisation—stemming from their identities as women in small towns, within a religiously orthodox context, and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—both Rehana and Shirin are portrayed as being less privileged in their capacity to express themselves fully within their specific circumstances. Their anger is subtle and silent, manifesting through clandestine acts of rebellion.



Figure 3. Rehana, dancing alone in her room, after being scolded by her parents for dancing at a wedding. Source. Alankrita, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, 20:23.

The film opens with scenes of Rehana successfully stealing lipstick from a mall shop, implying that this act of shoplifting may not be her first or last, as she seeks access to items otherwise denied to her by her parents. Upon arriving at college, she discards her burkha, applies the stolen lipstick, and steps onto campus as a woman reborn. Her domestic attire is concealed from her college friends, allowing her to seamlessly integrate into the youthful crowd. The removal of the veil (her burkha) unveils a new world for Rehana—one in which she is free to express her true self without fear of repercussions. She audaciously sings (a pursuit her parents forbid) during an audition for the college band and remains unfazed by public bullying from popular girls—whom she desperately wishes to befriend in her quest to ‘fit in.’ When her parents discover her dancing with abandon at a neighbour’s wedding, her mother reprimands her and confines her to her room. However, Rehana channels her anger by seeking solace in a poster of her idol—the rebellious youth icon, Miley Cyrus—as she dances freely in the silence and privacy of her bedroom (Figure 3). Rehana’s oppressors also assume the role of her primary caregivers, which elucidates her self-imposed silence and lack of overt protest against their restrictions. The audience interprets her anger through her piercing gaze, aggressive silence, and unwavering

⁵³ Ann M. Kring, ‘Gender and Anger,’ in *Gender and Emotion: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Agneta H. Fischer (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 219–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628191.011>.

resolve to savour her youth, despite the limitations imposed by her parents. Juxtaposed with Safeena's explosive fury, Rehana's silent rage enables her to maintain her veil of privacy, which becomes her sole weapon against the oppressive structures in her life. Her resistance is thus intricately woven into the complex labyrinth of her oppression, with her freedom defined by its invisibility to her oppressors.



Figure 4. Rehana, sobbing silently, after being banned from attending college and forced to stitch burkhas as punishment for not wearing one.

Source. Alankrita, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, 1:35:31.

Rehana's only vocal expression of anger occurs within the confines of her college, away from the repressive environment of her home. When asked for her opinion on the ban of jeans for girls at her institution, she articulates her perspective on the myriad restrictions that govern women's lives and their right to exist as equals in society. Here, she coins the phrase 'Jeans ka haq, jeene ka haq' (right to jeans; right to live), which subsequently transforms into a protest slogan. When she is apprehended for shoplifting and her father is summoned to bail her out, Rehana is notably seen without her burkha in the public setting alongside her father. She appears vulnerable and defeated, as though stripped of her only form of defence. Her father berates her, calling her a thief and expressing humiliation over her actions, shaming her for deviating from the path of religion. Rehana remains silent throughout the car ride, refraining from responding despite her father's prodding. Her silence exacerbates her father's anger—this choice embodies a difficult yet informed act of resistance. Following this incident, her father prohibits her from attending college (Figure 4) and demands that she marry against her will. Rehana ultimately bursts into tears, still choosing to maintain her silence. Her tears, coupled with her lack of agency, can be interpreted as a manifestation of defeat or, conversely, as a resolute refusal to succumb to her father's fury. Given that her silence previously afforded her secrecy and agency, this

response can also be perceived as her deliberate choice to uphold the status quo of non-communication and continue her struggle.

Shirin's character navigates the complexities of an abusive marriage while striving to preserve a sense of self beyond her roles as wife and mother. She seeks her husband Rahim's love and approval, which he consistently undermines through mistreatment and abuse. Shirin's anger is deeply rooted in this cycle of abuse, with Rahim emerging as the primary target of her rage. Initially, she makes excuses for his behaviour, but as the narrative progresses, she becomes increasingly bitter and resentful toward him. In one instance, when Rahim refuses to use a condom, she remains silent, offering little to no protest. In another, she eagerly prepares to reveal her secret job and promotion by baking him a cake, only for him to disregard her entirely while forcing himself upon her. In this moment, her frustration morphs into a seething (yet silent) fury, leaving her with scant opportunities for healthy expression. In a fit of anger, she stuffs the same cake into her mouth, nearly choking on it as she cries alone in the privacy of her kitchen (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Shirin, crying in the privacy of her kitchen, as she eats the cake she baked for her husband.
Source. Alankrita, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, 47:12.

Shirin ultimately discovers her capacity to fight back and express her anger upon learning of Rahim's affair. Spotting him in a coffee shop, she is horrified to witness his public display of affection for another woman—something she had longed for but believed he was incapable of. This revelation propels Shirin to her breaking point; however, unlike Safeena, her anger does not manifest through public confrontation. Instead, she suppresses it in the moment and redirects her energy toward strategising her next steps. She displaces her anger onto her children, refusing to prepare dinner and chastising them for minor infractions. In a bold move, she confronts Rahim's mistress at her home (disguised as a saleswoman), subtly warning her to keep her distance from her husband. When Rahim discovers this confrontation, he responds with violent

retribution, raping Shirin. In this moment of physical subjugation, Shirin chooses to break her silence for the first time, labelling him an adulterer and shaming him for his unemployment, even daring to slap him in retaliation for his assault. Her anger finally finds an outlet as she asserts that, although he may physically overpower her, she will no longer be victimised by his atrocities. In this moment, Shirin's verbal resistance serves not only as a reclamation of her agency but also as a poignant critique of the patriarchal structures that have long sought to silence her.

Conclusion

The portrayal of women in old Indian cinema (pre-1990s) was largely confined to stereotypical tropes, epitomised by the era of the 'silent heroine'—such as the mother, vamp, damsel in distress, dream girl, or courtesan. The new woman of New Age Bollywood cinema (post-1990s) has become more nuanced, portraying liminal characters juggling multiple identities. Yet, this new woman is far from completely liberated, now expected to fulfil multiple roles—sacrificial mother, obedient wife, assertive yet kind working woman, wronged avenger, and sensual item girl or courtesan.⁵⁴ In the last decade and a half of Bollywood (2010 onwards), there has been a visible rise in female-centred films where characters display renewed forms of individuality and agency.

In line with these shifts, we have examined select female characters from two contemporary Hindi films—*Lipstick Under My Burkha* and *Gully Boy*—to argue for an evolving archetype of the 'angry young woman.' While previous depictions of anger in Hindi cinema were largely masculine, dominated by the 'angry young man' figure of the 1970s, this began to change with the 'avenging woman' of the 1980s and 90s. Yet, this shift was predominantly within the narrow frame of rape-revenge narratives. Since then, the concept of the 'new woman' has captured the Indian imagination, continuously reinvented to meet the demands of the times. We have found that the 'new woman' in post-2000s Hindi cinema is represented through complex characters like Safeena, Rehana, and Shirin. The analysis of these characters reveals that anger as an affect has (and continues to) undergo a gradual transformation due to the changing face of postmodern national, gender, religious, and class politics in India. Female anger in modern Hindi cinema is not merely reactive but also constructive. It has become a way of life (as in Safeena's case) to escape gendered oppression and class marginalisation, and a mode of capturing or retaining power in family and social dynamics (as in Rehana and Shirin's case), allowing these women to live authentically rather than merely surviving under patriarchal threat.

Our analysis reveals how Safeena's anger manifests in violent public outbursts, which she uses to justify her resistance. A character like Safeena, whose affect resonates with many Indian women, has long awaited representation in Bollywood. Rehana and Shirin's anger, by contrast, is expressed largely through silence, without compromising the legitimacy of their rage. Although moments of silent suffering might be perceived as signs of defeat or failure, I argue that women's resistance to multiple layers of marginalisation can involve different avenues and expressions of anger compared to men's—making silence a strategic tool to conceal motives and destabilise

⁵⁴ Tanushree Ghosh, 'Reshaping "Bollywood": Dissident New Media Femininities and Hindi Cinema,' in *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, ed. Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora (Rutgers University Press, 2021), 201, <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978814486-015>.

power structures reliant on verbal domination. This helps explain the nuanced, gendered adaptations of onscreen anger in Bollywood films. The three female characters represent a new form of agency and voice in Indian cinema through their varied expressions of anger, with their anger not merely reactionary but serving as an empowering and individualistic response to marginalisation.

The emergence of the ‘angry young woman’ in contemporary Bollywood not only disrupts traditional cinematic tropes but also mirrors broader shifts in Indian society’s understanding of gender roles, female autonomy, and intersectional struggles. As Hindi cinema increasingly moves toward more diverse, layered portrayals of women, it opens new possibilities for feminist critique and cultural reformation. These representations of anger, whether overt or covert, offer a powerful lens through which to interrogate the intersections of gender, class, religion, and sexuality, and challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and the limitations imposed on women’s identities and self-expression. Moreover, the growing visibility of such narratives within mainstream Bollywood signals a crucial shift in popular culture—a shift that can influence not only cinematic trends but also social attitudes toward women’s agency and their right to express dissent.

Future research could investigate how these new female archetypes interact with diverse audiences and whether they contribute to meaningful changes in societal perceptions of female anger and autonomy. The potential for these portrayals to inspire real-world activism or shifts in gender dynamics within Indian society presents a rich area for further inquiry. Thus, while the evolution of the ‘angry young woman’ trope marks a promising step forward, it also invites ongoing analysis of how media representations shape, reinforce, or challenge existing power structures. In this way, Bollywood not only reflects the evolving realities of Indian women but also plays a vital role in their redefinition.

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