

# Feminism and Film: An Evaluation of Bollywood films as an indicator of the evolution of Indian perspectives on women's roles in families and society, as seen in *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani* (2023), *Badhrinath Ki Dulhania* (2017), and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001)

Yana Trivedi

## Introduction

The year 1947 marked the end of colonialism in India. A vast, new nation of over 350 million people was born, allowing for the rise of a new national identity (O'Neill). During the 1950s and the 1960s, Indian cinema reached its “golden age”, becoming the Bollywood industry so well known today, the Hollywood of Bombay—now Mumbai, India (Semwal and Jamwal).

This gave rise to actors, musical composers, dubbing, etc which worked to make Bollywood a phenomenon, spanning across the entire country (Semwal and Jamwal). For example, dubbing, or the replacement of the audio of a movie with a translated version, made the industry accessible to all Indians. Since India is an extremely linguistically diverse country, dubbing allowed the cultural phenomenon of these movies to spread throughout, acting as a unifying factor, and contributing to a rising sense of nationalism.

The themes in these films also often portrayed an underlying message of unity and brotherhood as a nation. These messages uplifted the population, creating belief that “the common man could escape from the realities of life, the social and political discriminations, disillusionments and communal dilemmas” (Chakraborty). Similarly, themes in Indian cinema continued to shift to reflect the values of the population from the 1970s well into current day.

During the 21st century in particular, Bollywood movies often portray reflections or critiques of traditional patriarchal norms, as India experiences a rise of feminism. Earlier movies of this era display traditional patriarchal structures, whereas later movies are often outright feminist. Women's agency in Indian cinema is well represented in films such as *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani* (2023), *Badhrinath Ki Dulhania* (2017), and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), through the main theme of the movie, strong female leads, or simple plot details.

## ***Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001)**

*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G) (2001), is a film by Karan Johar featuring a unique contrast between traditional values and modernity. Created at the very beginning of the 21st century, this movie heavily reflects traditional patriarchal family structures. The main character, Rahul Raichand, portrayed by actor Shah Rukh Khan, is the adopted son of a wealthy businessman, Yash Raichand, portrayed by Amitabh Bachchan. As Rahul approaches marriage age, Yash wishes to set him up with a suitable girl. However, he falls in love with clumsy, brash, middle-class Anjali Sharma (*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*).

The use of Bollywood megastars Shah Rukh Khan and Amitabh Bachchan is significant in conveying the message of the film, due to their prominence in different eras of Bollywood. Bachchan has been a key figure since the 1970s, where he embodied the “angry, young man” archetype, a violent and hypermasculine figure in nature. Thus, this type of character can often be tied to misogyny. Bachchan's prevalence in this type of role solidifies the viewer's understanding of him as a character that limits women's agency in K3G. In contrast, Khan gained fame in the 1990s, during a period of economic liberalization and modernization in India. He played characters that could be classified as “yuppies”, or young urban professionals who were often very wealthy and fashionable (Chatterjee). This type of modern character can be

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associated with liberalism, and thus with economic greater agency for women. The clash between these two characters within the movie can be taken as a clash between traditionalism and modernity.

K3G portrays traditional patriarchal structures and stereotypical female roles throughout the movie, as was common in the early 2000s, but does represent a shift away from some conservative values. One way in which this can be seen is the insistence of Yash in his desire to pick out a wife for his son. The idea of “parampara”, the Hindi word for tradition, is a consistent theme throughout the movie. Arranged marriage is a tradition in Indian culture that remains relevant to this day, because they “sustain the patrilineal and patrilocal family system” (Allendorf and Pandian). Patriarchs thus control the youth in the family, especially the women. This can be seen in a study by the National Library of Medicine in which less than 10% of women surveyed in India from 1970-2000 chose their spouses by themselves (Allendorf and Pandian). This means that the women’s parents, usually fathers, chose their husbands. Thus, women’s agency is severely limited in the field of marriage and homemaking. However, this study also showcased the percentage of parents who chose their daughters’ spouses without any input from the daughter dropped from 50% to a little over 30% out of the women surveyed (Allendorf and Pandian).

This shift is demonstrated within K3G, as the arranged marriage between Rahul and another girl is disregarded, and as Anjali marries Rahul for love, much to the dismay of Yash Raichand. One scene in the movie highlights this in particular. Rahul’s mother comments on her own arranged marriage to Yash by contrasting it to the changing times, when Yash interjects and makes it clear that nothing has changed. He uses a menacing tone of voice and repeats himself several times slowly, creating an emphasis on this conflict between arranged marriages and love marriages, effectively shutting down his wife. In the scene, there is a still close-up of the unwavering and sternly calm expression on his face as he speaks, looking directly into the camera, which is contrasted in the next scene, where his wife is pictured staying silent, looking away from the camera (*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*). This emphasized his control and created another layer to the limitation of women’s agency. However, this scene acted as a criticism of the limitation of women’s agency by portraying Yash as villainous in this scene, subtly developing the idea of women’s agency in marriage and households. Though he is portrayed in this way, Yash’s mentality reflects a majority of that of Indian people. According to a 2020 study by Pew Research Center, 80% of college-educated Indian adults believe that a wife must obey her husband (Pew Research Center). In the case of K3G, this ideal is criticized by villainizing Yash, which speaks volumes about the film’s perspective, subtly speaking out against the limitation of women’s agency post-marriage. Well ahead of its time, the movie reached broad audiences in an attempt to modernize the Indian perspective.

Furthering this idea of “parampara”, or tradition, is the role of women in the workplace after marriage in India. Traditionally, women were expected to leave their jobs and careers and reside only in the domestic sphere after marriage. In a study conducted by Dr. Sanghmitra Buddhapriya, an Associate Professor in the FORE School of Management, New Delhi, over 90% of the women surveyed believed that familial duties come in the way of job duties, and over 80% of women agreed that women were expected to handle these familial duties (Buddhapriya). In K3G, Anjali uproots her entire life to marry Rahul and move away with him. This included leaving her job working at her father’s sweet shop. This is represented by specific scenes with Anjali throughout the movie, before and after her wedding. Before her wedding, she had a prominent role in her place of work. Though this was not a primary feature in the movie, Anjali

can be seen receiving delivery instructions for sweets, manning the front counter, and fanning smoke in the kitchen of the shop. Though these scenes appear in small snippets to establish larger plot points irrelevant to Anjali's story, they represent her activity in the workplace prior to marriage. After her marriage, Anjali is only seen in a domestic sense; she is not pictured in the movie without other members of her family. In fact, a majority of her scenes in the remainder of the movie after her marriage take place in her own home or her in-laws' home, where she is pictured cooking, praying, or tending to the family and home. Exceptions to this include her attending events at her son's school and outings with her husband and family, which contribute to the sense of domesticity and lack of presence in the workforce, whereas Rahul is pictured going to work (*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*). Anjali's newfound domesticity was taken as a very obvious decision in the movie, as if it was the only thing she could possibly do. Anjali's thoughts on leaving her home, her family, and her job were not touched upon in the movie, creating the implied messaging that they do not matter. In this way, the movie shows the traditional Indian expectation of women leaving their jobs after marriage. This ideal is not critiqued, like the tradition of arranged marriages, however. Thus, in this sense, the movie reflects the limited economic agency of women in India at the time.

K3G also indirectly touched upon the traditional standards of conservative dressing in women with the dynamic character of Pooja, Anjali's younger sister. Pooja embodies 2000s Western fashion: backless tops, sparkly pink fabric, and short skirts. However, she is not shamed in any way throughout the movie, outside of minor protectiveness from Rahul. In fact, one of the most iconic dialogues from this film comes from when Anjali and her mother tease Rahul's protectiveness with the line, "Rahul, take a chill pill" (*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*). This line shows that there is no malice or disapproving attitudes towards Pooja and her fashion statements, which conveys the remarkable message of accepting "revealing" clothing as normal fashion, rather than scandalous attire in an Indian household. Indian standards tend to lean towards women dressing conservatively. Women are often shamed for showing too much skin, as if this is the cause for violence and abuses against women. Women in India are often told to cover up, in order to prevent these violations (Vijay and Agarwal). This is not the case in K3G. Pooja has much greater agency, as she is allowed to wear anything she wants. This demonstrates a shift in the mentality of Indian households, towards being more accepting of less conservative dressing styles.

### **Badhrinath Ki Dulhania (2017)**

Badhrinath Ki Dulhania (2017) is a film featuring the iconic duo Alia Bhatt and Varun Dhawan. In this movie, similar to *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, the male lead, Badhrinath Bansal, is part of a rich family of loan sharks, whereas the female lead, Vaidehi Trivedi, is part of a poorer middle-class family. In this movie, Badhrinath, or Badhri, tries to convince Vaidehi to marry him. However, Vaidehi is an extremely career-forward woman who is far too intelligent for Badhri's brashness and downright misogyny. However, Badhri is relentless in his attempts, continuing to pursue her (*Badhri Ki Dulhania*).

The title of the movie, Badhrinath Ki Dulhania, translates to 'Badhrinath's Bride'. This simple detail detracts from the importance of Vaidehi, reducing her worth to simply Badhri's future wife. The use of Badhri's name in the title centers the story around his journey to find a bride, rather than his growth as a character through interaction with Vaidehi. However, in the final scene, Badhri refers to himself as "Vaidehi's groom," which summarizes the growth he underwent throughout the movie in expanding his thinking surrounding women's roles in society.

Badhrinath Ki Dulhania also addresses the topic of women in the workforce after marriage. In the movie, Badhri's father is interviewing female candidates as possible suitors for Badhri. Rather than speak to the women directly, he speaks to their fathers (*Badhri Ki Dulhania*). This in itself is a reflection of women's agency, as their fathers control their lives. In India, women's decisions are often controlled by their fathers and then their husbands (Chakrabarti). This acts as a limitation to their economic and social freedoms. The woman's father, who sits off-center and fidgets throughout the scene, comments on how his daughter wishes to continue working after marriage, because she has high academic qualifications. Badhri's father sharply retorts on this, as other women move to the side of the frame, serving food. He sits still in the center of the room in the scene, on a tall, golden throne-like chair. This positioning draws attention to him in a kingly manner, and his sharp, almost cruel response establishes him as the antagonist of the movie, similar to Yash Raichand in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. His position as the movie's antagonist develops the movie's perspective of critiquing the limitations of women's career-related freedoms.

The movie features a montage scene of Vaidehi receiving career-related training in Singapore, in her aspiration of becoming an air hostess after leaving Badhri at the altar. The montage depicts cool-toned lighting in Singapore, contrary to the almost oppressive warm hues of prior scenes in India, where Vaidehi was confined to her familial duties of getting married. The montage depicts her in a workplace and living independently, showing her economic and social agency. When she returns to India for Badhri, she starts her own training institute. This scene featured similar cool hues, showing the progress in her status throughout the movie (*Badhri Ki Dulhania*).

This movie also addresses the social issue of dowry in India. The practice of dowry is the transfer of money, property, or other forms of wealth from the bride's family to the groom's family (Neela Pushpam). Dowry originated as a voluntary gift between families as a celebration of the marriage. However, as India became colonized, it shifted to a burden for the bride's family to bear, in order to successfully rid themselves of the daughter, who is considered a burden to bear (Soni). This concept is best put by Badhri himself, in the opening of the movie: "In our country, every child's 'balance sheet' is prepared since the time of its birth...boy equals asset...girl equals liability" (*Badhri Ki Dulhania*). This kind of misogynistic thinking drives the principle of dowry: women are a liability and therefore a dowry price is set to compensate for the burden of another woman. The practice of dowry was outlawed in 1961. However, in 2017, the year this movie was made, India saw almost 7,000 deaths related to dowry and the violence that often ensues in the transaction (Sen). This type of crime against women is a danger to women's agency, and more importantly, a danger to women. Badhri Ki Dulhania severely criticizes the whole practice in the pre-credits of the movie, with a 20-second disclaimer deeming the practice of dowry and discrimination as a "social evil", contributing to the overall message of the movie (*Badhri Ki Dulhania*).

The issue of consent and violence against women within Badhrinath Ki Dulhania is perhaps the most applicable to all societies. Women in India and all over the world face harassment: from catcalling, to rape, to kidnapping and murder. According to the World Health Organization, nearly a third of all women have been subject to physical or sexual violence (World Health Organization). In India, in the year 2009, less than 10 years before the creation of the movie, there were more than 21,000 cases of rape and more than 89,000 cases of cruelty against women ("Facts & Figures: India"). Violence against women is not limited to a single region, country, or even continent: it is a global phenomenon that plagues the world. This movie

intends to critique this, but often overlooks the extent to the seriousness of the matter. Badhri quite literally attempts to kidnap and kill Vaidehi after she leaves him at the altar, yet she forgives him, does not file a report, and later, marries him (*Badhri Ki Dulhania*). This unintentionally reflects a trend of increases in abduction of women in India. In 2016, a year before the movie was released, the percentage of crimes against women that were related to kidnapping spiked to over 20% (Mitra and Saha). This feature of the movie corroborates with this trend without condemning it, which is an unfortunate reflection of Indian society's perspective on the abduction of women as a whole.

### **Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani (2023)**

Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani (2023) plays upon the same basic storyline as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. The son of a rich, confectioner Punjabi family, Rocky Randhawan, falls in love with a career-oriented, well-educated, Bengali girl, Rani Chatterjee. *Rocky Aur Rani* is far more modern than the other two movies, featuring pop culture references and far more open-minded thinking. Therefore, women's agency is far more developed.

Rocky is played by Alia Bhatt, the same actress who played Vaidehi in *Badhri Ki Duhlania*. Alia Bhatt often portrays feminist icons in various Bollywood movies. For example, she played the Gangubai in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), which was a very progressive movie with a strong female lead about women claiming their own agency after being taken advantage of. This movie, along with *Badhri Ki Dulhania*, paved the way for Alia's association with female characters that fought for social change in their movies, breaking out of patriarchal boxes.

The title of the movie translates to 'Rocky and Rani's Love Story'. The use of both characters' names shows that the movie is a story of two equals, rather than just the telling of a man's attempt to attain a woman. Unlike *Badhri Ki Duhlania*, this movie shows an evolving Indian landscape through simply the title, giving the leading female character as much ownership and significance in the movie as the man.

One significant aspect of *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani* is the portrayal of women in positions of power and leadership. This is a concept seen in Rani's family, and even in Rocky's traditional one. For example, Rocky's family owns a confectionery company that was expanded by his grandmother (*Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani*). This reflects the growing trend of women's leadership in India. According to a 2024 All India Management Association Report, 83% of companies included in the study had an increase in female leadership over the past 5 years in fields such as biotechnology, IT, healthcare, etc. (Diksha). This general trend exists in politics as well: the percentage of women holding seats in one particular political party, Lok Sabha, increased by over 8% from 1957 to 2024 (Gayatri and Himani). As women begin to play a more dominant role in Indian society, the Indian media reflects these changing norms, especially in *Rocky Aur Rani*. For example, Rocky's family owns a confectionery company that was expanded by his grandmother. Rocky's family is the traditional, misogynistic one. Therefore, for his grandmother to be unquestionably dominant in family finances and play a key role in their business is an extremely significant portion of the movie because not intended to make a criticism. Rather, it is a reflection of the change that has occurred in Indian society. Many features of the movie are intended to critique Indian society; this feature not being one of them speaks volumes about the progress that has been made in the expansion of women's agency in obtaining leadership positions in society.

*Rocky Aur Rani* directly addresses and critiques rape culture in India, which is not directly stated and dismissed entirely in *Badhri Ki Duhlania*. In *Rocky Aur Rani*, Rani is a news reporter.

She interviews a politician and questions him about a rape case in his district, destroying his argument on live television. When he explains that it is the woman's fault for dressing a certain way and that the rape case was far too commonplace for him to comment on, Rani laughs directly in his face and calls him a nasty man when he objectifies women and sympathizes with rapists. She brings up a point on air that women should not have to cover themselves in order to be safe in a society of dirty minds. The politician storms away, and Rani is satisfied despite her coordinator being worried that they will be kicked off the air (*Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani*). This scene is an explicit description of the growing activism against rape in India, vividly depicting the role members of India, especially women, are taking to advocate for safer spaces in society. Rani's public tirade against the politician somewhat reflects the public outcry against a gang-rape case in 2020., which resulted in mass protest (Mehta and Tiwari). The use of social media in this process, similar to how Rani did, also caused mass protest in India, in the form of the #MeToo movement (Dey and Mendes). The #MeToo movement has led to a 14% increase in workplace harassment reports in India (Shafira Rahmawati Handayaningrum et al.). As more women find the courage to speak out, societal change can initiate. The development of Rani being able to use her voices in the movie to speak out for other women represents the movie's commitment to showcase the development of women finding their voices through activism, allowing them to advocate for a safe place in society.

Rocky Aur Rani also approaches the female beauty standard in India through the character of Gayatri "Golu" Randhawan, Rocky's sister. 'Golu', which is an affectionate nickname in Hindi that means round, is used in a derogatory manner throughout the movie. Gayatri's worth is tied to her weight: proposals for her marriage get rejected, she is constantly belittled, and her family refuses to see her talents past her appearance. Eventually, Gayatri snaps and refuses to be called 'Golu' anymore (*Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani*). Gayatri's character is a critique of antiquated beliefs that a woman must be beautiful to be of value, which ties back to earlier notions that a woman has no value to her family and a liability to be married off, seen in *Badhri Ki Duhlania*. One Eurocentric beauty standard in India that is especially prominent is slimness: women are pressured to be skinny to appease the prominent arranged marriage market (Rabi et al.). Rocky Aur Rani directly critiques this stereotype and the notion that a woman's worth is tied to her weight by making Gayatri a complex character. In the movie, she is an economist who learns to stand up for herself in her family, therefore creating her own value outside beauty and marriage. Rocky Aur Rani thus furthers the development seen in *Badhri Ki Duhlania* that a woman's primary purpose is marriage, extending it to encompass a critique of antiquated beauty standards as well.

## Conclusion

Bollywood films showcase the development of Indian perspectives on women's roles in families and society. *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* represents the modernized perspectives on women's clothing in India, a marker for societal autonomy, while also critiquing the idea of forced arranged marriage, a marker for familial autonomy. However, this movie does little to show developments in the economic autonomy of women, reflecting widespread perspectives of Indians in the early 2000s. *Badhri Ki Duhlania* excels in advocating against the practice of dowry and representing a strong female character, but does little to critique the violence and kidnappings women face in Indian society, especially during the 2010s. This is boldly contrasted by *Rocky Aur Rani*, which shows women in economic and familial leadership positions, bold

discussions about the societal evil that is rape and violence against women, and body positivity, reflecting the activism and progress associated with the 2020s.

These three movies were chosen because they are significant markers in the Bollywood film industry over the course of the past three decades. They all feature high-profile actors of the time and have won many accolades. K3G won five Filmfare awards and nine International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) awards, with an additional 10 Filmfare nominations and 15 IIFA nominations. Badhri Ki Duhlania was nominated for eight Filmfares, winning one, and was nominated for two IIFA awards, winning one as well. Rocky Aur Rani was nominated for 20 Filmfare awards and 12 IIFA awards, winning four Filmfare awards and three IIFA awards. They also follow the same general plot line, in which a pair falls in love but the man's family does not approve of the relationship.

The advancements depicted in the movies are representative of India's strides forward over the past three decades in increasing women's agency, expanding their agency in their families. Media is often a reflection of current society, and these Bollywood movies reflect Indian perspectives through criticisms and acceptances of certain societal features surrounding women's roles in family and society.

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