Interrogating Patriarchy: Transgressive Discourses of ‘F-Rated’ Independent Hindi Films

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Abstract
Since its inception at the Bath Film Festival 2014, the ‘F-Rating’ has been adopted as a yardstick to foster equitable representation of women in film. The rise of a new sub-genre of Hindi ‘Indie’ cinema (Devasundaram, 2016, 2018) has been augmented by an array of bona fide Female-rated independent films. These films fulfil the triune criteria for F-Rating, featuring women both behind and in front of the camera – as directors, actors and scriptwriters. I argue that these distinct female voices in new independent Hindi cinema have engendered discursive filmic spaces of resistance – alternative articulations that transgress India’s patriarchal national master narrative. Indian cinema thus far has been presided over by Bollywood’s hegemonic bastion of male-dominated discourses. The mainstream industry continues to propagate gender-based wage disparity and hypersexualised representations of the female body via the serialised song and dance spectacle of the ‘item number’. The increasing presence of F-Rated Hindi films on the international film festival circuit and through wider releases, gestures towards these films’ melding of the global and local. Drawing on my curation work with the UK Asian Film Festival (UKAFF) and discursive analyses of seminal F-Rated films, this essay highlights the pivotal role played by F-Rated Hindi Indie films in opening up transdiscursive dimensions and creating national and global conversations around issues of gender inequities in India.

Keywords
Bollywood, F-Rating, Hindi films, independent Indian cinema, gender, patriarchy

Introduction
In my previous research (Devasundaram, 2016, 2018), I chart the emergence and development of an alternative form of contemporary independent or ‘Indie’ Indian cinema since 2010. In almost a decade, these Indie films have gained global visibility, establishing themselves as a de facto genre alongside dominant Bollywood. One of the
elemental characteristics that sets apart the Hindi Indies from their mainstream commercial Bollywood counterparts is their foregrounding of prominent roles for women – both behind and in front of the camera.

It must be mentioned that the historiography of Indian cinema has not been bereft of strong and prominent female voices – Fearless Nadia and Devika Rani (Thomas, 2015, p. 97, 122) gained the status of screen icons during the silent cinema era of the early 20th century. Further along the Indian cinema timeline, Sangeeta Datta (2000, p. 73) identifies female directors such as Sai Paranjpye, Kalpana Lajmi and Aparna Sen who sculpted nuanced portrayals of women ‘in search of social and sexual identity’. These female auteurs established their own distinctiveness of film form and style, especially during the dying days of the Parallel and Middle cinema movement in the 1980s. Aparna Sen’s particularly prolific career continues into the contemporary age, as manifested in her Indie film – Sonata (2018).

In this essay, I argue that the emergence of a new wave of female-centric Hindi Indie films embodies a transgressive contestation of Bollywood’s protractedly chauvinistic portrayals of women. These independent films also mark a conspicuous paradigm shift from previous Parallel Hindi cinema modes, codes, grammar and representative strategies of addressing gender-related themes and issues. In essence, the new Indies are more explicitly interrogative, experimental, captious and even controversial in contesting entrenched patriarchal norms and structures in India. These dissenting, distinctive and multifaceted approaches fashioned by the new Indie filmmaking space are coterminous with a consistently prodigious output of films from a plethora of established and first-time female filmmakers, spanning a spectrum of discourses. This study will therefore demonstrate how several Hindi-language Indies’ investigative approach to exploring gender-related themes and issues from female perspectives is undertaken on a transdiscursive level of intersectional engagement. In this context, the female-oriented films that will be mentioned in this study are enmeshed in a network of religious, ethnic, linguistic, socio-cultural, political, economic and caste-related discursive dynamics.

Reiterating the overarching premise of how the new Indies stand out from previous avatars of gender-specific film narrations, I will illustrate how several new Indie Hindi films are ‘F-Rated’, fulfilling the tripartite stipulations of this term which has its provenance in the 2014 Bath Film Festival where it was coined by festival director Holly Tarquini (FilmBath.org, 2019). The F-Rating applies to films that are directed by and/or written by women and feature significant female protagonists (F-Rated.org, 2019). This rating has now become synonymous not only across multiple media portals and digital platforms, including the BBC, The Independent, Entertainment Weekly, Elle and IMDb (F-Rated.org, 2019), but also in the international film festival circuit. In this regard, I will draw on my curatorial experience of programming F-Rated Hindi Indie films for the UK Asian Film Festival (UKAFF) – Europe’s longest running Asian cinema showcase.

**Setting the Context: Bollywood’s Patriarchal Matrix**

In order to locate the emergence and proliferation of F-Rated independent Hindi films, it is necessary to situate these films’ evolution in relation to the encompassing
superstructure of Bollywood. Elsewhere I have observed that Bollywood’s largely reductive, patronising and patriarchal portrayals of women onscreen are mirrored by the industry’s discrepant systems and practices of operation (Devasundaram, 2016). This includes gender-based wage disparity, unethical and exploitative processes in casting and recruitment of female actors, and often parlous working environments, where the safety, wellbeing and dignity of women are not always assured. A survey of film personnel working behind the camera as directors, writers and producers revealed the Indian film industry’s significantly disproportionate gender ratio of 6.2 men to one woman, in stark contrast with the general average of 3.9 men to one woman (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper, 2014). The same study commissioned by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, also revealed that sexualisation and tokenisation of female roles was pronounced in popular Indian films (Nair, 2017).

These latter facets of the industry, normalised in some measure as Bollywood’s ‘casting couch’ culture, eventually reached a tipping point with the #MeToo movement arriving in India in 2018. This collective action was galvanised by a slew of revelations of sexual misconduct and abuse by prominent male Bollywood figureheads and several powerholders in the media, politics and other sectors. However, the diegetic legitimisation of misogynistic performativity in mainstream Hindi films is not a new phenomenon. A content analysis of nine popular Hindi hit films from 1997 to 1999 revealed how ‘moderate sexual violence was treated as fun and romantic’, especially where film heroes routinely harass onscreen female love interests into submission (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003, p. 327).

Commercial Hindi cinema’s unbridled affirmation of neoliberal consumerism since the early 1990s and its ‘unquestioned acceptance of patriarchy’ also indicates the swing of ‘Bollywood’s ideology to the far-right’ (Mehta, 2012, p. 9). This ideology is especially in tune with the idiosyncratic brand of juxtaposed religious fundamentalism and free market capitalism espoused by the right-wing fundamentalist BJP government under Narendra Modi’s leadership. The masculine codes legitimised in Bollywood narratives and hypersexualised song and dance ‘item numbers’ are often underestimated in their ideological potency to cultivate and nurture a misogynistic mindset and a sense of masculine entitlement that views the female form as an object of appropriation and exploitation. The discursive socio-cultural dimensions in which commercial Hindi film’s normalised fetishism of female bodies could be framed became explicitly visible in the horrific gang rape and murder of a young medical student Jyoti Singh on a moving bus in Delhi in 2012. Deepa Mehta’s experimental docufiction film Anatomy of Violence (2016) alludes subtly to a link between the perpetrators’ misogynistic sense of entitlement and the popular sexualised Hindi hit film songs they listen to on the very bus that is later transformed into the mobile arena for their brutal and grisly act.

A potential panacea to the embedded patriarchy in Bollywood points towards enhanced representation of women in the industry and autonomous articulation of female issues by women. In this regard, author and journalist Ruchika Tulshyan identifies ‘one of the main ways that we’ll see change is when more female directors are able to helm cameras and helm the scripts and make films for women by women’, whilst also calling for more ‘complicated and nuanced’ representations of women on screen (Mandhai & Gautam, 2018). This is precisely the lacuna that is beginning to be filled by the alternative narratives of F-Rated Hindi films from the independent filmmaking space, particularly with the advent of Netflix and Amazon Prime Video in
India providing an online platform. However, commensurable transformation in the male-dominated mainstream film industry structures, practices and hierarchies is not so easily achieved.

In a social, cultural, religious and political constellation where the dominant film form – Bollywood and the overarching national narrative legitimise and sanction patriarchal modes of lived experience, the emergence of first-time female filmmakers expressing innovative and expressive cinematic counter-narratives to the presiding status quo marks a discernible shift from the more implicit previous Indian Parallel cinema narrations of overlooked and suppressed women’s stories.

F-Rated Hindi Films and the Film Industry

Amidst the transformations effected by the rise of new F-Rated Hindi cinema, it is important to assess whether the independent content of these films is accompanied by an identifiable thrust towards enhanced creative autonomy and structural accessibility for first-time female filmmakers who are not already linked by lineage and patronage to the Bollywood industry. The increasing proliferation of F-Rated Hindi films, particularly through digital streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video may have augured the possibility of wider access to female-centric film content. However, it remains contextually relevant to locate the relative position of emerging independent female filmmakers within the mainstream Bollywood film industry, which dominates modes of Hindi film production.

Several scholars and media commentators have drawn attention to the ‘long-standing monarchies of Bollywood’ (Dixit, 2008, p. 45), with their ‘family legacies’ (Dudrah & Desai, 2008, p. 9) spawning a hereditary system that is now etched as the status quo in the commercial Hindi cinema production superstructure. Elsewhere I have gestured towards a system of patronage and privilege in the mainstream film industry that stems from a dynastic clan system – a genealogical continuum of family star names – Kapoor, Bachchan, Deol inter alia (Devasundaram, 2016, p. 110). In relation to the new Indies, there exists a ‘godfather’ syndrome, where independent Hindi films are often reliant on Bollywood actors or producers adopting the role of benefactors in terms of funding or publicising a film – examples include Karan Johar, Ajay Devgn and Prakash Jha, whose names punctuate the title credits of independent films such as The Lunchbox (2013, dir. Ritesh Batra), Leena Yadav’s Parched (2016), and Alankrita Shrivastava’s Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016). Several filmmakers from the new Indie sector are often obliged to become conjoined to Bollywood’s hegemonic and patriarchal industry structure, by an umbilical cord of funding dependence and proxy publicity gained by associating with a Bollywood personality. There are exceptions, and this dependence is not absolute, as several self-funded, internationally co-produced and crowdfunded independent films have demonstrated, but the idiosyncratic reliance on mainstream sources of funding, distribution and publicity, by the Hindi Indies, largely distinguishes them from the western conception of ‘Indie’ filmmaking as emerging from outside the studio system.

The advent of new independent Hindi cinema has also influenced Bollywood content in recent times, mobilising the commercial industry to espouse more socially
Devasundaram

conscious narratives, particularly in relation to gender-based themes and issues. Some Bollywood films such as *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017, dir. Shree Narayan Singh) and *Padman* (2018, dir. R. Balki) have addressed the lack of public toilets and sanitary pads for women in India. However, several of these mainstream films have been censured for reinscribing male lead actors as ‘saviour’ figures without whom female emancipation and social transformation are nigh on impossible. *Mission Mangal*, (2019, dir. Jagan Shakti) a Bollywood film which ostensibly seeks to credit the women who spearheaded the Mars Orbiter Mission run by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), ends up privileging its male Bollywood hero – Akshay Kumar. Ironically, Kumar was extolled for ‘picking stories like *Padman* and *Mission Mangal*, which would have struggled to get greenlit and distributed without the star actor championing them’ (Pal, 2019). In essence, the male patron or godfather syndrome that dominates the Bollywood film industry (and impacts the Indies) is mirrored in a tendency towards onscreen relegation of women to secondary roles, in Bollywood films with purportedly female themes. This disproportionality foregrounds the salient role of alternative Hindi films which genuinely fulfil the criteria of the F-Rating, in challenging mainstream industry norms.

Shefali Bhushan, who broke into the industry as the writer/director of *Jugni* (2016) identifies finance as the most intractable obstacle faced by female filmmakers entering the Hindi film industry. She notes the conventionalised industry perception that ‘large audiences will only come if there is a male protagonist’ (Bhushan, 2017). The entrenched patriarchy in mainstream Bollywood structures therefore makes it even more difficult for entrant female filmmakers who have no prior connections to the mainstream industry but would like to espouse more independent F-Rated content. In this context, Alankrita Shrivastava asserts that ‘true challenges to the status quo currently can be found only in Indian independent cinema because, she says, mainstream movies like *Pink* and *Dangal*, “though dealing with female protagonists, ultimately glorify the power of the man to save the woman”.’ (Bhushan, 2017).

Nandita Das comments on young female filmmakers attempting to foray into the film industry, whilst alluding to fellow female director Tanuja Chandra’s perspectives:

> I’ve virtually been a fringe-dweller in this industry. From where I see it, younger girls are taking less bullshit, while we as the older generation still look for ways to negotiate our space. Frances McDormand, at the Oscar ceremony, insisted on a clause for inclusion—a rider that will make it necessary for teams to include women across departments. Tanuja’s thought was spot on, that people will have to actively seek female talent in every space. If an A-lister creates the inclusion rider, what is seen as dispensable today, will become a necessity tomorrow. (Dubey, 2018)

Das’s proposed panacea to male monopolisation of the film industry nevertheless seems to place the burden of responsibility on Bollywood A-listers to push the envelope of equal representation by leveraging their positions of privilege. This once again underscores the paradox faced by F-Rated Hindi filmmakers of having to rely in significant measure on being visibilised and ‘empowered’ by powerful, influential and recognisable mainstream male personalities and establishment figures in order to
propagate alternative female-centric content which challenges patriarchal norms. This contradictory configuration lends credence to the conception of a hierarchical industry system that has an impact on the independent filmmaking sector in contemporary India.

As mentioned earlier, the Hindi Indies are idiosyncratically different from their western counterparts in that they are often obliged to align with mainstream funding sources and personalities in order to bring their films to fruition or even animate an idea for a film in the first instance. This reliance on big Bollywood-based production houses and producers was seemingly imperative in the absence of a dedicated independent film funding and distribution infrastructure. Therefore, the superstructure of Bollywood’s dynastic and often nepotistic industry practices can supervene on the independent Hindi cinema space. This overweening symbolic, cultural and economic capital wielded by Bollywood (which I have framed elsewhere as Bollywood’s meta-hegemony – see Devasundaram, 2016) in some measure inflects the affiliations of Bollywood female filmmakers such as Zoya Akhtar (whose illustrious lyricist/poet father Javed Akhtar has renowned and durable links to the mainstream Indian cinema industry), Meghna Gulzar, daughter of eminent Hindi film director, lyricist and poet Gulzar, and to some extent Kiran Rao, who is married to Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan. The eponymous AKP (Aamir Khan Productions) has served as a funding and production platform for several seminal Hindi independent films, from Peepli Live to Kiran Rao’s Dhobi Ghat. In an interview Kiran Rao affirms unequivocally her creative independence in crafting the vision, morphology and content of her directorial debut Dhobi Ghat (Devasundaram, 2016). This affirmation of creative independence – echoed by Anusha Rizvi, who also aligned her film Peepli Live with AKP – can be understood as one of the modes to perform creative autonomy in terms of espousing alternative film content whilst operating within corporate and mainstream structures of film production.

The above points prompt return to the notion of a hierarchical or lineage-oriented system, where recognisable surnames affixed to celebrated film families can be leveraged as gravitas to gain wider visibility and recognisability. For instance, after watching Ruchika Oberoi’s Island City Bollywood director Zoya Akhtar recruited the Indie director to write the screenplay for a story segment Akhtar directed in the Netflix portmanteau film Lust Stories (2018) (Mukherjee, 2018). Similarly, alternative cinema auteur Aparna Sen has passed on the baton to her daughter Konkona Sen Sharma, who made her first directorial foray with A Death in the Gunj (2018). Sen Sharma has been a longstanding acting figurehead, essaying prominent female film roles in front of the camera in the independent Hindi film space.

Industry ‘outsiders’ such as Mumbai-born Gitanjali Rao counter the contention that a preponderance of independent filmmaking ventures is invariably subservient to Bollywood’s clan system and cronyism. Rao inaugurated her career with self-produced animation short films and has gone on to direct full-length animation films featuring strong female protagonists, such as Bombay Rose (2019), the first Indian animation feature to open the Venice International Film Festival Critics’ Week. Rao testifies to the difficulty of sculpting independent content in the mainstream Bollywood industry:

It is very difficult if you are trying to make an unconventional film. Actually, the industry does not inspire me in any way. My inspiration, influence, craft come from independent
films made in India and the world, regional Indian films, pre-Bollywood-era Hindi films and world cinema. (Ghosh, 2019)

In summation, it appears that the advent of boundary-pushing alternative F-Rated content may not necessarily be folded into or matched by radical structural transformations in the Hindi film industry. To some extent, the reliance of independent filmmakers on Bollywood has been attenuated by the ascendency of Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, as the de facto providers of an online Indie distribution infrastructure. This shift to the digital domain seems to have precipitated the democratisation of independent filmmaking practices which have hitherto operated under the patriarchal and patronage-inflected Bollywood industry. At first glance, digital streaming services appear to provide a more egalitarian, level playing field that is not as predicated on the dynastic and lineage-based privilege that underpins the Bollywood industry. This is ironic, considering the standardising and subsuming tendencies of profit-based multinational corporations such as Amazon and Netflix, whose entry into the Indian film market has complicated further the definition and ontological conception of ‘Indie’ films and filmmaking.

However, Smith Mehta (2019, p. 3) cautions against any premature heralding of digital streaming platforms ‘despite the preliminary evidence promoting internet television as a safe space for the empowerment of alternative voices and vulnerable bodies’. He cites examples of misogynistic content commissioned on Amazon Prime, Netflix and YouTube to argue that ‘female creators continue to struggle for compensation as well as screen space as compared to their male counterparts’ (Mehta, 2019, p. 3).

Female Indie Filmmakers and F-Rated Independent Hindi Films

This section will appraise a range of influential F-Rated Hindi films that have emerged from the new independent Indian filmmaking space since 2010. It must be mentioned that there are a diverse range of female-centric films from across the regional and vernacular independent filmmaking spheres, particularly the Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam and Bengali independent film sectors. In the interests of brevity, specificity and scope, I will streamline this study to focus on examples of key Hindi Indie films that share the discursive, interrogative and experimental ethos of their regional language counterparts within the broader classification of new Indian Indie cinema.

Anusha Rizvi’s debut film Peepli Live (2010) could be singled out as a pathbreaking film that largely catalysed the emergence of the new wave of independent Indian films. As a former NDTV journalist, Rizvi adopted the diegetic frame of her film as a canvas for prominent portrayals of women in the Indian urban and rural spaces, who are embedded in patriarchal systems of everyday existence. This is epitomised in the film’s representation of ruthless and ambitious TV reporter Nandita (Malaika Shenoy) who is dispatched from her privileged comfort zone of covering urban current affairs in New Delhi to documenting the impending suicide of an impoverished farmer in the remote and rustic hinterland of Peepli village. Nandita’s rural female counterpart is the feisty and irrepressible Dhaniya (Shalini Vatsa), wife of the beleaguered farmer Natha (Omkar Das Manikpuri) who has announced his intention to commit suicide.
Despite being circumscribed by normative masculinity, Dhaniya refuses to comply with the patriarchal rural familial structure. She is scornful of her husband’s and his brother’s ineptitude and failure to resolve their predicament whilst also being suspicious of the big city media’s manipulation of her husband’s situation. The key element that delineates this film’s representation of resolute women from earlier Hindi Parallel films is its utilisation of satirical dark humour to communicate the discursive and omnipresent overtones of patriarchy as experienced by women in both urban and rural spaces.

Nandita remains beholden to her male editor boss’s directive to go out and gain a sensational news story in Peepli whilst Dhaniya despite being the influencer in her household is powerless when it comes to the all-encompassing male-dominated local and national political matrix that eventually decides her family’s fate. Diverging from the conventional narrative storytelling modes of female Indian directors in the 1980s, Rizvi adopts black comedy, postmodern self-reflexivity and pastiche and a simultaneous macro/micro level (Delhi/Peepli) discursive socio-political frame. Through a more widely accessible yet idiosyncratic satirical social realist medium she is able to situate the relative societal status of women and map gender inequality overlaps in the dialectic of urban/rural spaces.

As writer/director, Anusha Rizvi was able to espouse her particular interpretation of the exigent discourse of mass farmer suicides in contemporary India. However, her agency to narrate and articulate personal perspectives was not devoid of impingements on the creative process from executive echelons of the film’s production hierarchies. Rizvi reveals that she had to resist attempts by the corporate producers to incept commercial elements into the film, including exhortations to cast prominent mainstream actors and embellish the storyline with Bollywood-style song and dance sequences (Devasundaram, 2016, p. 210). The fact that Rizvi was nevertheless able to script an entertaining alternative storyline addressing urgent socio-political themes in collaboration with a mainstream corporate funding and distribution source – UTV Motion Pictures, paved the way for several subsequent Hindi Indie films to follow, particularly those with F-Rated sensibilities.

Kiran Rao’s Dhobi Ghat is another bellwether F-Rated film that punctuated 2010, marking it as the year in which female-fronted films were making their presence felt in the Bollywood-dominated Indian cultural milieu. Dhobi Ghat garnered critical and commercial success (Hindustan Times, 2011), and was a conspicuous instance of glocal storytelling (Devasundaram, 2016, 2018), blending its local Mumbai thematic context with a global aesthetic and a hybrid soundscape created by Oscar-winning Argentinian music composer Gustavo Santaolalla. Written and directed by Rao, the film narrative was largely the filmmaker’s personal hermeneutic of the social class divide and multiple lived experiences in Mumbai. In the hyperlink ‘city film’ format used in Dhobi Ghat, and commonly deployed in new Hindi Indie cinema, four disparate characters collide in the aleatory hustle and bustle of the big city. Amongst the characters are two prominent female protagonists – Shai (Monica Dogra), an American investment banker of Indian origin, and Yasmin (Kriti Malhotra), a small-town Muslim migrant to Mumbai, struggling to cope with her floundering marriage, philandering husband and the unrelenting alienation caused by life in the cosmopolis.
Rao is able to foreground the voices of Shai and Yasmin who have diametrically opposite antecedents. Shai’s privileged upbringing and affluence affords her significant agency to negotiate the city and to pursue romantic and platonic alliances with augmented levels of freedom. By contrast, Yasmin is confined in a loveless marriage to a misogynistic spouse, and her inability to countenance the clinical, dehumanising and disorienting modes of urban existence in Mumbai eventually drives her to suicide. Rao’s adoption of the hyperlink narrative template and her representation of women from antinomical social and class persuasions once again presents a more intersectional framework, diverging from the narrative linearity and uni-dimensional focus of previous female filmmakers from the Parallel cinema sector.

Leena Yadav’s *Parched* (2015) is another F-Rated film that presents a discursive insight into rural dimensions of female lived experience in environments of gender inequity. Akin to *Peepli Live*, *Parched* tackles the comparative discourses of marginalised women in the rural space whilst concomitantly interpolating the traces and residues of a mythologised urban imaginary that haunt the rural performativity of their everyday existence.

The film tracks the lives of four women in a remote and barren region of Gujarat. The women face individual daily struggles against domestic violence, repression, routinised debasement and abuse at the hands of the village’s menfolk and a hegemonic social structure. In this milieu, where women have internalised misogyny as the norm, the potentiality for resistance against patriarchal institutions is embodied by Bijli (Surveen Chawla). She makes a living by entertaining the village’s men in a circus tent, performing titillating song and dance set-pieces reminiscent of sexualised musical ‘item numbers’ conventionalised by Bollywood.

The strategic parodying of the Bollywood item number acts as a transgressive statement, laying bare the exploitative, sexist and objectifying ethos of this almost compulsory facet of big-budget commercial Hindi cinema. Importantly and unlike in Bollywood films, the viewer is privy to both sides of Bijli’s promiscuous performance. We witness her actual enactment of female sexuality to pleasure the scopophilic male gaze and the contextualised aftermath of Bijli’s performance in its depersonalising and extractive impact that strips her of all self-esteem and dignity as an individual.

Leena Yadav also gestures towards the rural women’s connectivity to cosmopolitan discourses that seem a world apart from their spartan rustic existence. For instance, lead character Rani (Tannishtha Chatterjee) is a single mother who bears the burden of caring for her elderly mother and rebellious teenage son. Rani receives anonymous mobile phone calls from a person professing to be Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan, and this kindles a flirtatious if fantastical digital dalliance. On a discursive level, Rani’s digital connectedness signposts the paradox of modern India, where remote rural regions are now woven into the mobile network grid and yet antiquated patriarchal systems, institutions and social practices prevail as the predominant order. Another sequence in the film could be identified as a rupturing and transgressive representation of female sexuality in the rural space. Rani’s closest friend and confidant Lajjo (Radhika Apte) suffers routinised violent abuse at the hands of her alcoholic husband. After one such particularly brutal attack, Lajjo seeks refuge in Rani’s hut. As Rani attempts to comfort Lajjo and soothe her physical wounds, a spontaneous moment of sensual solidarity ensues. The two women share a fleeting moment of physical
intimacy – an outpouring of their love for each other and empathy for their shared oppression. This gesture of physical contact also symbolises repressed female desire which is so inured to male subordination that the inflicted and internalised emotional trauma triggers a spontaneous human responsive release – the haptic closeness that brings Rani and Lajjo together.

The film’s improbable climax – the four women escaping their rural confines by embarking on a road trip to find freedom in the city entails wish fulfilment rather than verisimilitude, considering the actual realities of female subjugation in rural India. However, even this imaginary emancipation constitutes an important development in utilising film space to envision resistance and revolution against hegemonic male-constituted modes of being. Female-driven F-Rated films from *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat* to *Parched* are indexical of increasing engagement with women’s issues that has also inspired Hindi Indie male directors to address similar themes. This is manifested in films such as Pan Nalin’s all-female road movie *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015), Devashish Makhija’s *Ajji* (2017) and Aditya Kripalani’s *Tikli and Laxmi Bomb* (2017) and *Totta Pataaka Item Maal* (The Incessant Fear of Rape, 2018). The cohort of F-Rated Indie films has catalysed Bollywood to respond on some level in terms of recasting its hitherto male-oriented narratives. This call to change is manifested in mainstream Hindi films such as R. Balki’s *Padman* (2018) which addresses the lack of easy access to sanitary pads for women in India. Shifting attitudes in the commercial Hindi film industry are also visible in the example of Bollywood actor Ajay Devgn who aligned with *Parched* as one of the film’s producers. Surveen Chawla the actor who plays Bijli in the film notes:

> For this film (‘Parched’) you need to have somebody, who is sensitive. In my knowledge, it cannot be made by a man. The flag bearer or captain of the ship has to be a woman. But when a man is supporting the film, it shows how their mentality is changing towards women. It’s a positive sign. (News18, 2015)

Ruchika Oberoi’s portmanteau film *Island City* (2015) invokes the structure of *Dhobi Ghat* in its use of the ‘city film’ strategy, portraying intersecting human narratives within the urban space of Mumbai. Two of the three story segments in the film are centred around women protagonists. The second instalment depicts a family that is presided over by a repressive and domineering patriarch – Anil Joshi (Bhushan Vikas). He is wounded in a mass shooting (which occurs in the first story instalment of the film), lapses into a coma in hospital, and is tethered to a life support machine. This new lease of domestic freedom prompts his hitherto repressed wife Sarita Joshi (Amruta Subhash), two young sons and elderly mother Ajji (Uttara Baokar) to find solace in the fantasy world of a family-oriented TV serial. This segment of the film displays discursive engagement with India’s wider socio-cultural milieu by delving into the phenomenon of widespread and serialised television soap opera viewing. *Purshottam* is the title of the TV show which becomes a source of audio-visual addiction for Sarita Joshi (Amruta Subhash), her sons and Ajji. In *Purshottam*, the eponymous male protagonist (Sameer Kochhar) is positioned as a paragon of moral probity and custodian of traditional Hindu religious values. Purshottam – which means ‘supreme male’ epitomises the TV drama’s celebration of patriarchy, with the title character being venerated as the alpha male by his immediate and extended family, particularly his doting mother.
and dutiful wife. This fictional TV show is largely a reflective prototype for widely popular Hindi television dramas in India, such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Because a mother-in-law was also once a daughter-in-law) and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii* (Story of Every House) which promote sanskari (traditional) virtues (Munshi, 2012, p. 140) and male-dominated joint family structures. The imbrication of popular Hindi film and television must be mentioned here, in terms of the adoption of similar patriarchal family tropes and Hindu religious ideology by Bollywood director Karan Johar in his big blockbuster family film sagas such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Sometimes Happy Sometimes Sad, 2001).

The second story chapter in *Island City* therefore extends an ironic commentary on the mimetic relationship between (hetero) normative patriarchal family codes enacted in popular Hindi television soap operas and the daily lived routine of Sarita and her mother, who are subjected to Anil Joshi’s ruthless domination as the male ‘head’ of the household. Television serials in India function specifically as potent ideological tools to reinforce majoritarian and orthodox Hindu religious practices alongside heteronormative family-oriented traditions, morals and values, as the default setting for authentic ‘Indianness’. In this context, it is important to highlight the discursive connections between commercial Hindi cinema and TV serial portrayals of submissive and dutiful women, conforming to a larger patriarchal theocratic national narrative imagined by and coded into the ideological DNA of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh) – the proto-fascist far-right Hindu apex organisation whose affiliates include the ruling BJP government. As Diana Dimitrova observes:

> There is a call to return to orthodox tradition and religious values. The media, especially popular Indian cinema, reinforce the figure of the self-effacing *pativrata* (loyal and devoted wife), or *Sita*, as a symbol of Hindutva. Most often a more liberal representation of women’s issues is stigmatized as “Western”, non-Indian, and unworthy of imitation’. (Dimitrova, 2014, p. 97)

By fashioning via Anil’s spouse Sarita and Purshottam’s wife, two portraits of demure and subservient women who willingly capitulate to their husband’s directives, Ruchika Oberoi invokes and interrogates the sacralised image of Sita – the idealised, universalised and apotheosised wife figure in Hindu mythology. The filmmaker proceeds to subvert the status quo upheld in several Bollywood films and television series, by suggesting that Sarita, Ajji and the two boys are secretly relieved, and indeed, inwardly euphoric at the prospect of Anil’s impending death. In essence, the women and children can continue to watch their beloved soap opera *Purshottam* free from Anil’s tyrannical rule and violent restriction of their television consumption. Analogous to the use of ironic humour in *Peepli Live*, satire is deployed in *Island City* to demonstrate how the two women’s escape to the digital domain of *Purshottam* only transports them to a fantasy world where women continue to be cloistered and regulated within traditional, religious and patriarchal family structures – a more aestheticised and sanitised mirror image of Sarita’s and Ajji’s real world existence. For instance, in an episode of *Purshottam*, the title character gives his mother a gift voucher from Kailash Tours and Travels for an all-expenses-paid pilgrimage to the holy Himalayan Hindu site of Badrinath. This blatant display of product placement in the TV show instigates Ajji to telephone Kailash Tours and Travels and book her own package tour to Badrinath.
This facet of the film draws attention to the curious conjoining of conservative Hindu religious ideology and neoliberal consumerism that forms the dominant discourse of religion-based politics and marketisation in India under Narendra Modi’s government.

Eventually, in the television series, Purshottam is assaulted clandestinely by his scheming property-seeking younger brother and is rendered comatose and reliant on a life support machine. This mirroring of the TV-obsessed Joshi family’s real-life circumstance as their own family patriarch battles for life in hospital reiterates the intended blurring of representation and reality in this story strand of Island City. The overall impact of this F-Rated film is brought to the fore at the film’s climax, where the viewer is informed that Anil Joshi has finally passed away – his framed photograph is visible hanging on the living room wall festooned with a commemorative flower garland and incense sticks. Also visible in the adjacent bedroom are the rapturous next of kin – Sarita, her mother and the two boys, glued to their television serial, happily ensconced in its aura of ideological indoctrination. This revealing climactic snapshot suggests ambivalence in the family’s emancipation from the clutches of patriarchy. On the one hand, Anil Joshi’s demise has purchased Sarita, her sons and Ajji welcome respite from his subordinating and authoritarian rule over the household. On the other hand, they are willingly pliant psychological objects of the broader patriarchal and religious national imaginary which has woven its spell over multitudinous similar domestic spaces across India. The family’s prostration before tevisual male deities such as Purshottam invokes Vijay Mishra’s (2002) comparison of cinema halls screening blockbuster Bollywood films as ‘temples of desire’. In this instance of Island City, we see the scaling down of the cinematic big screen to the television frame as an equally potent shrine to communicate majoritarian religious ideologies and legitimise patriarchal family structures.

In this sense, the second segment of the film presents a layered insight into the portrayed middle-class women’s lived experience in their interior domestic space. This portrait is framed against the backdrop of broader discursive contextual considerations of ideology, class, religion and gender. This discursive strategy is transposed to the film’s final instalment, where a working-class factory worker Aarti (Tannishtha Chatterjee) is paired forcibly by her parents with a coarse and chauvinistic automotive mechanic as a potential husband, despite Aarti’s protestations. The film’s third narrative therefore echoes the curtailment of female agency in domestic situations even in big cosmopolitan centres such as Mumbai. It also underscores the masculine entitlement of patriarchal figures such as Aarti’s father and her enforced fiancé Jignesh (Chandan Roy Sanyal) in orchestrating the destiny and choices of the female figure they have subjugated.

Aarti begins to receive anonymous love letters in the post, raising her hopes of an escape from Jignesh’s clutches. She summons the courage to tell him she is not interested in their relationship as she has found someone else. However, Aarti’s momentary resistance to patriarchal norms is nullified when she discovers the romantic letters are auto-generated. Their provenance is an Artificial Intelligence programme – part of a social experiment run by a Big Brother-type corporate organisation – Systematic Statistics, which also features in the film’s first and second storylines. Disillusioned and desperate, Aarti is compelled to return to Jignesh, who ridicules her
naiveté, saying she is lucky to be the recipient of his beneficence because no other man could possibly want her.

Aarti’s humiliation and exploitation at the hands of patriarchal and corporate powerholders gestures towards a larger link between neoliberal consumer fetishism and the objectification of women. In some measure, Aarti’s reception of anonymous romantic letters in *Island City* is similar to the opportunistic phone calls Rani receives from ‘Shah Rukh Khan’ in *Parched*. In this sense, both film characters (played by Tannishtha Chatterjee) become passive objects rather than active agents of dominant discourses (capitalism and Bollywood) in contemporary India. The corporation’s systematic mechanical reproduction of love letters dehumanises and reduces Aarti to the status of assembly line product, mimicking the very same repetitive factory process that constitutes her daily labour. As a tool of corporate exploitation, working-class Aarti therefore experiences class-based alienation not only on a Marxian economic level but also through gendered alterity. This continued socio-economic separation on the basis of gender and class is a barometer of the entrenched wealth disparity in contemporary neoliberal India, despite the nation’s purported emerging economic superpower status. The discursive dimensions that exacerbate social and gender imbalance are addressed below:

As work gets restructured in new ways under flexible regimes of accumulation in the new economy, obfuscating the boundaries between work and non-work, the ensuing sense of alienation is not just a product of capitalist exploitation of people as workers: it is also connected to socially sanctioned gendered norms and relations that simultaneously influence and are influenced by the mutually reinforcing dictates of global capital and hegemonic regimes. Mukherjee (2008, p. 51)

The two story sections of *Island City* therefore provide nuanced insights into how the regime of patriarchal domination pervades both domestic interior and social exterior spaces of the female characters’ everyday existence. As has been discussed, this omnipresent patriarchy is aided and abetted by neoliberal India’s unbridled economic aspirationalism which is incongruously undergirded by socio-religious conservatism and an obsessive preoccupation with morals, traditions and values. The next section will appraise how the representation of private and public spaces of normalised patriarchy in F-Rated Indie films can be integrated into discursive global conversations through the mediatory interface of film festivals.

**Foregrounding F-Rated Films through the Film Festival Space: The UK Asian Film Festival**

The UK Asian Film Festival – UKAFF (formerly the London Asian Film Festival) has served consistently as a global conduit of exhibition for several female-themed independent Hindi films (Tonguesonfire, 2019). The culmination of this enduring facet of the festival was its 2018 edition, which adopted an F-Rated theme. Concomitant with the development and ascendant visibility of the Indian Indie film sector, UKAFF has screened several bona fide F-Rated films, most notably films that have been embroiled
in censorship complexities at the behest of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) – commonly referred to as the Indian Censor Board. In this section, I will focus on a few specific F-Rated films that have been programmed strategically as part of the festival.

A significant example of the film festival space constituting an arena to emancipate narratives of gender-based repression, sexual violence and abuse is the selection and screening of Alankrita Shrivastava’s controversial feminist film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), as part of UKAFF 2017. The film attracted the opprobrium of the CBFC’s incumbent chairman Pahlaj Nihalani, who branded it ‘lady-oriented’, thereby exposing the misogyny enmeshed in the fabric of powerful executive organisations such as the state-run CBFC. Shrivastava’s film was denied a certificate of release in India resulting in the director seeking alternative portals of exhibition at international film festivals. In the process, the filmmaker adopted the role of spokesperson for women’s rights and ongoing issues relating to feminism and free speech in India. Shrivastava states:

In the context of Indian cinema, the film is important because it is made from a female point of view. Unlike most of the dominant mainstream cinema, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* has a clearly female gaze. And perhaps the things the film talks about have rarely been discussed in cinema in India. (Spowart, 2017)

Shrivastava’s singling out of the film’s female gaze is a rebuttal of the dominant male gaze privileged in Bollywood item numbers – a film format also critiqued by Leena Yadav through the self-reflexive song and dance performed by Bijli in *Parched*. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* was screened at the Edinburgh, Leicester and London editions of the UK Asian Film Festival in March 2017, winning the ‘Best Film’ award. A curational motivation for bringing the film to wider intercultural UKAFF audiences was to afford attendees access to an F-Rated film that was occluded from wider circulation in its home country. Another aim was to create conversations around the fact that the patriarchal and discriminatory systems faced by the female characters in the film and their attempted rebellion against male-dominated bastions were discursively entangled with broader institutions and structures in modern India, as exemplified by the censorship quandary faced by Alankrita Shrivastava.

The UKAFF screenings were followed by panel discussions and audience Q&A sessions around the theme – ‘Women in Cinema’ and attended by Rathna Pathak Shah – one of the lead actors in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. The post-screening discussion also underscored how enactments of normalised patriarchy and gender discrimination are experienced on a global level and present opportunities for counter-narratives, as manifested in the #Me Too movement in America. A transdiscursive multilogue was therefore engendered during UKAFF 2017 through parallel screening events such as a panel discussion on ‘Gender Violence: Cinema as a Mirror for Ethical Evaluation’, hosted by the Centre for Film and Ethics at Queen Mary, University of London, following a screening of Deepa Mehta’s *Anatomy of Violence*. The post-screening discussion was rendered accessible to the wider public via the UKAFF YouTube channel, thereby contributing to the discursive apparatus surrounding the proliferation and thematic content of F-Rated Indian Indie films. This is especially important considering 4,930
people attended the festival in London and over 2,320 people attended screening events in the other cities across the UK (UKAFF BFI report, 2017). In this regard, the summative UKAFF report mentions how ‘the festival met objectives of female empowerment and encouragement through the specially tailored events and huge array of talent sharing their knowledge and experience’.

The above-mentioned diverse interactions generated by F-Rated film screenings resonate with the glocal ethos of new Indian Indies such as Lipstick Under My Burkha, which blend local themes and issues with globally identifiable aesthetic visual modes and narrative strategies of storytelling (Devasundaram, 2016, 2018). Independent drama Waiting (2015) is another example of an F-Rated film amalgamating local/global sensibilities and created by a preponderantly female production team including director Anu Menon and actor Kalki Koechlin. The film was selected as the closing night feature for UKAFF 2016, with Menon winning the Best Director award. This hybridity of local and global is a significant facet that distinguishes the F-Rated Indian Indie films from their Parallel cinema forebears of the 1980s. The inclusion of Konkona Sen Sharma’s directorial debut – A Death in the Gunj in the F-Rated UKAFF 2018 programme signifies both a continuum and divergence from the legacy of talismanic female filmmakers in the 80s. This ambivalence is metonymised by Indie film actress Sen Sharma stepping up to the directorial podium to join her mother and renowned auteur Aparna Sen, who continues to craft F-Rated films such as the aforementioned Sonata.

Conclusion

The intertwining of onscreen and offscreen female representation and farraginous intersectional discourses is an integral component of the F-Rated independent Hindi films cited in this essay. The international platform provided to F-Rated Indie films via the film festival space functions as an exogenous site of convergence between female filmmakers and diverse audiences. This presents an opportunity to appraise the transdiscursivity of F-Rated Hindi films in order to reveal granular aspects of gender issues largely endogenous and particular to India yet potentially situatable and applicable to a relational network of themes and issues on a global scale.

In their focus on questions of female agency and articulation, the new independent F-Rated films continue the pathbreaking trajectory of pioneering female filmmakers in Hindi cinema history. However, as has been demonstrated, the new Indie films also embody a disjuncture from earlier strategies, approaches, scale and scope of representing women’s issues through the visual image. The new films have harnessed F-Rating facets to contest the hegemonic bastion of male-dominated Bollywood, thereby opening up potential for recasting and overhauling the entrenched patriarchy of commercial Hindi cinema’s dominant metanarrative and industry practices. By conjoining local and global levels of discourse, taking on a trenchantly interrogative socio-political tone and addressing the polymorphous narrative strands sutured into India’s coeval neoliberal and religio-political agenda, the F-Rated Indie films constitute a distinctive voice and a radical benchmark in modern Indian cinema.
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Note

1. The panel discussion involving Kavita Datta and Amit Rai from Queen Mary University of London and Ravinder Barn, Royal Holloway University of London, was chaired by Ashvin Devasundaram. The video can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfBzZUU5-6A&t=1498s

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