

## **Locating Gender in The Cinematic Construction of Student Activism**

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### **Abstract**

Mainstream cinema has flourished to become an accommodating space for the expression of student activism. Many 21st century films employ student protest narratives to explore the ideological agendas of the youth and its constantly evolving ethos. This research employs Qualitative Character Analysis of the female protagonists of seven student protest films to unearth ideological identification of student leadership and gender-specific placements of leadership attributes in cinema. It uses the Marxist Film Theory and the Feminist Film theory to analyze the intersectionality between student activism and gender in the context of mainstream cinema. In doing so, the research outlines the gendered misrepresentation of female narratives and the consequent alienation of women from positions of advocacy.

**Keywords** – *Gender, Films, Student Protest, Cinema, Leadership, Student Activism, Female Protagonist*

### **Introduction**

The Hindi-cinema rhetoric plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural politics of India (Tremblay, 1996, p. 303). Films located in a distinct socio-cultural space are representative of its reality and can propagate its social mores to a significant audience. Institutions like politics, governance, marriage, family and romance are well-denoted through creative mediums like the cinema.

Furthermore, films form an essential mode of production which streamlines the ideological allocation of society (Agocuk and Keçeci, 2017, p. 7941).

Student protest culture in the 21st century is constantly evolving with multiple forms of expression. The filmic discourse is one of the many avenues through which the essence of student activism is professed and propagated to the mainstream audience. The cinema sheds light on student protest agendas and its unique functioning. However, notions of student leadership and the representation of the female discourse are tainted with gender-specific delineations that tend to stray away from the Feminist understanding of agency and authority.

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The difference between the depiction of male and female protagonists in student protest films raises pertinent questions about the role of gender in the cinematic expression of political authority and leadership, all of which must be adequately dwelt upon to eradicate a gendered bias in the filmic representation of modern-day student activism.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Representation of Student Protests*

Organized student campaigns against socio-political issues have increasingly found their way within the fold of mainstream politics and the media is the most reliable source of information for determining the reception of its public agenda (McCombs, 2002, p. 2). However, creative mediums like films, advertisements and TV series have recently emerged as powerful players in political communication (Agocuk and Keçeci, 2017, p. 7941). Student protest films can facilitate the subtle expression of protesting students' concerns through their distinctive representation of student activism. In this way, the cinema plays a crucial role in the culmination and propagation of socio-political outcomes resulting from student protests (Agocuk and Keçeci, 2017, p. 7942).

The cinematic representation of student protests is largely based on the tenets of socio-political awareness, energetic collective mobilization and revolutionary reform-seeking. Student leaders are synonymous with notions which inspire rebellion, revolutionary change, honesty and genuine compassion for the downtrodden. The representation of student activism has changed over the years but the general discourse around it is marked with its opposition to university governance/national political outfits and its lobbying for equitable powerplay (Rodriguez-Amat and Jeffery, 2017, p. 524).

#### *Student Leadership and Ideological Identification*

Student leadership plays an essential role in the outlining of student protests both in cinema as well as in reality. Leaders are key contributors to the reflection of the protest ideology. North (1981) defines ideology as a belief system which dictates a stakeholder's "world view" about dominant features of life and work like division of labour, political rationalisation, economic classification of society, etc. (North, 1981, p. 49).

Cinematic references to student activism tend to use lead protagonists as a means to reflect the essence of protest culture and project the characters' ideological presence onto the audience.

Student leadership in cinema is characterized by enthusiasm to lead future generations and devote oneself to the reshaping of the society (DeGroot, 1998, p. 4).

Student leaders are represented as the contemporary embodiment of the spirit of non-conformity (Sundar, 1989, p. 125). They persevere against regimes of control such as the capitalist cultural ethos, traditional hegemony imposed by parental and societal authority, gender discrimination, taboo and misinformation and authoritarian political jurisdiction (Rodriguez-Amat and Jeffery, 2017, p. 529).

#### *Symbolism in Cinema*

Mainstream cinema is an impactful forum accessible and available to many which establishes the dominance of visual art forms in political communication. Cinema is known to facilitate the reconstruction of reality by building close-knit narratives that cater to and tend to reform the authentic

reality of its target audience (Agocuk and Keçeci, 2017, p. 7941). In other words, it is an effective mode of communication to present and propagate ideologies.

Mike Wayne, in his book called “The Political Film” (2009), explains how political films utilize representative forms to present a relatable intermingled vision of the audience’s daily life (Wayne, 2011, p. 9). Cinematic art employs metaphoric insinuations of the real in reel to subtly express the nuances of authoritarian hegemony and political muscle. Films representing student protests fall within this category of political films that are symbolic of its audience’s authentic reality.

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

### ***Dissent, Resistance and Activism***

Dissent refers to an authoritative expression of disapproval extended by preexisting social groups embedded in complex structured social networks like peasant workers, students, religious groups, etc. towards a higher power (Butcher et al., 2014, p. 5). Repression of distinct social

groups inevitably leads to the expression of dissent and ultimately a movement of resistance (Moore, 1998, p. 851).

The persuasive authority of dissent is wielded against power holders to generate structural opportunities that reflect the protest agenda and fulfil the confrontational battle set off by the dissident voices (Ratliff and Hall, 2014, p. 287). This encourages activism which operates through mobilisation, raising public awareness, moulding public opinion, initiating social service, etc. (Schwedler and Harris, 2016, p. 3).

### ***Video Activism***

The core purpose of video activism is underscored in its allowance of the expression of marginalized voices to manifest legitimate opportunities for the fulfilment of under-represented objectives (Jansen, 2011, p. 3). The constantly evolving nature of cinema has paved the way for divergent modes of video activism that go beyond documentary films.

Video activism facilitates the impactful representation of student protests by “purveying alternate versions of contemporary reality” without disturbing their official socio-political discourse (Chanan, 2012, p. 2). It aims to “correct” or transform the mainstream media narrative and create “counter propaganda” (Chanan, 2012, p. 2). Owing to the apparent failure of the mainstream media in projecting honest representations of socio-political matters, video activism aims to target public opinion along distinct ideological contours – most commonly representative of dissident groups (Harding, 1997, p. 7).

### ***Marxist Film Theory***

Arising from the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) and the era of the Soviet Union, the Marxist film theory contends that every shot in a film is structured to convey a definite meaning, particularly a cultural/political one. Early Marxist filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov targeted “deep focus” cinematography wherein the narrative was concept-driven and aimed to showcase an intellectualized ideological struggle between two or more societal groups (Forsyth, 1997, p. 269).

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Classical Marxist ideology contends that “false ideas” propagated by the Bourgeoisie capitalist class shall be countered with revolutionary reforms proposed by the Proletariat working class to quash the false advantageous consciousness developed in the former’s interests (Kleinhans, 2000, p. 108). Marxist Film theory institutionalized cinema as a commodity to produce, organize and propagate multilayered socio-political ideas that undermine the dominant class’ interest (Forsyth, 1970, p. 278).

***Feminist film theory***

Feminist philosophers like Judith Butler have analysed the projection of “women” in stereotypical ways throughout literature, theory and film. Butler, in her article “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity” (1990), explores the intersectionality between power and perception of women as the gender binary defines the same. While female protagonists’ discourse in cinema is addressed only in relation to her male counterpart, the male protagonist exercises authority across multiple roles not involving the woman (Smith, 1999, p. 13). The gendered assignment of roles in cinema is thus questioned whereby female leaders are only stereotypically represented as auxiliary support to other powerful male leaders despite this gender gap not being predominant in modern politics (Smith, 1999, p. 16).

**Objectives**

The objectives of this research are two-fold.

1. (a) To analyze the depiction of student leaders’ ideological discourse in mainstream Hindi-cinema.  
(b) To study cinematic representation of student protests as a division of video activism.
2. (a) To discern if cinematic representation of student leaders presents and propagates gendered stereotypes about leadership attributes.  
(b) To explore the intersection between gender identity and political authority.

**Methodology**

The research employed objective qualitative character analysis of female protagonists in select films of 21st century mainstream cinema. It used purposive sampling in the selection of film characters keeping in mind the research theme of student activism. 7 films in the Hindi dialect were selected between the year 2000 and 2016 for this study.

<i>Film</i>	<i>Characters for Analysis</i>
Haasil ( <i>Tigmanshu Dhulia</i> , 2003)	Female - Niharika (enacted by Hrishitaa Bhatt) Male - Anirudh (enacted by Jimmy Sheirgill)
Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi ( <i>Sudhir Mishra</i> , 2003)	Female - Geeta (enacted by Chitrangada Singh) Male - Siddharth Tabji (enacted by Kay Kay Menon)
Yuva ( <i>Mani Ratnam</i> , 2004)	Female - Radhika (enacted by Esha Deol)

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	Male - Michael Mukherjee (enacted by Ajay Devgn)
Dil, Dosti, etc. ( <i>Manish Tiwary</i> , 2007)	Female - Prerna (enacted by Nikita Anand) Male - Sanjay Mishra (enacted by Shreyas Talpade)
Gulaal ( <i>Anurag Kashyap</i> , 2009)	Female - Kiran (enacted by Ayesha Mohan) Male - Dilip (enacted by Raj Singh Chaudhary)
Aarakshan ( <i>Prakash Jha</i> , 2011)	Female - Poorvi (enacted by Deepika Padukone) Male - Deepak Kumar (enacted by Saif Ali Khan)
Chakravyuha ( <i>M. Saravanan</i> , 2016)	Female - Anjali (enacted by Rachita Ram) Male - Lohith (enacted by Puneeth Rajkumar)

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique based on the researcher's deliberate judgement due to the specific qualities possessed by the sample population, which in this case comprises the female protagonists in Hindi-language student protest films of the 21st century (Etikan et.al, 2015, p. 2). Validity and efficiency, being the two most important pillars of research methodology, substantiate the researcher's use of judgement sampling (Etikan et.al, 2015, p. 4).

The ideological message conveyed by the films was analysed and qualitative character analysis of the female protagonists was conducted to discern the position of women in the filmic representation of student activism. The researcher used the Feminist Film theory and Marxist film theory as a point of reference to draw inferences about stereotypical gender-based projection of leadership attributes and the employment of cinema as a mode of political activism.

The researcher selected 3 codes to reflect the aforementioned themes in the study.

Code Categories	Theme
Stereotypical Othering of the Female Discourse	Nonchalant, Privileged, Dispassionate, Flirt, Temptress, Greedy, Transgressive
Gendered Construction of Leadership Attributes	Weak, Feeble, Unconcerned, Unassertive, Unsited
Reinforcement of Reformist Ideology in Student Activism	Honest, Diligent, Socialist, anti-Capitalist, Brave

## **Analysis**

The research explores the mainstream cinematic representation of student politics in India within the context of internalised gender politics. Elaborated below are the researcher's inferences on the intersection between gender and power in the cinematic construction of student politics.

### ***Ideological Trope: Revolutionary Marxism***

The most central feature of student protest films is located in its ideological recognition of the revolutionary Marxist discourse. The films resonated with Karl Marx's opposition to the "false ideas" propagated in the interest of the upper-class society. They projected the unequivocal image of student leaders as courageous reformist authorities fighting against Capitalist domination.

The observation of student leaders as revolutionary stalwarts is crucial in consolidating the researcher's analysis because the categorization is exclusively applied to male leaders only. Student protest films vividly represented the gender-specific discourse of inspirational male leaders while excluding the female narrative, thereby portraying male leaders as socialist role models but ostracizing women from the revolutionary Marxist discourse.

Thus, the ideological identification of student leaders was a polarizing tool that delineated women from student politics and detached them from the essence of student activism.

### ***Otherring of the Female Discourse***

The researcher observed the systemic repudiation of the female protagonist from the purview of serious politics. Radhika, Niharika, Geeta and Purna are prime examples of female protagonists that represent stereotypical nonchalant women who only conceptualize reality around the precincts of love and romance. Poorvi, despite having reformist ethics, is portrayed as being embroiled in an emotional battle between her lover and her father. Kiran fails to perform as a strong student leader because of her underlying family drama and exploitative romance.

The aforementioned characters are far removed from the film's focus on student activism and bear testimony to the internalized othering of the female experience from the Marxist ideology of resistance. They are represented as dispassionate/greedy flat characters that only exist to add weight to the development of the male protagonist's personal discourse. This corresponds to the Feminist Film theory which addresses the representation of gender relations as a tool to subvert the identity of women in cinema.

### ***Propagation of Gender Stereotypes***

The mainstream Bollywood representation of student politics evidently showcases the interrelation between gender identity and socio-political authority. The presence of women in

student activism films is only acknowledged in domestic matters. They do not interact with the theme of dissent and stay relegated to the stereotypical roles allotted to women.

Certain films under this research primarily portray the female protagonist as a sexual conquest that all men desire but only the male protagonist has triumphed. In fact, *Dil, Dosti, etc.* (Manish Tiwary, 2007) exhibits Apurv's success in sleeping with Purna as part of a challenge measuring his sexual attractiveness. Instances like these reinforce gender stereotypes that qualify women as temptresses and dispassionate empty beings.

Female protagonists are also painted in an elitist and privileged light, thereby utilizing class consciousness as a means of justifying their exclusion from student politics. However, the same is not representative of reality. Hence, the films undoubtedly contribute to perpetuating gender stereotypes through the othering of the female discourse and the reinforcement of typical female narratives.

## Findings

### 1. *Purvi* (Aarakshan, Prakash Jha, 2011)

- The film focuses on the mobilization of support for caste-based reservation in educational institutions and students' resistance against caste discrimination.
- The film seems to isolate Purvi's discourse from the background of casteism whereas Deepak's revolutionary ideals against caste discrimination are glorified.
- Purvi conforms to multiple stereotypical constructs of socially acceptable women. Her traditional ethnic attire (01:07:58), failed attempts in cooking (00:10:26) and adherence to her father's judgement reflect her accommodation of conventional socio-cultural norms.



- Purvi's representation is dominated by her emotional discourse. She argues that reservation cannot bridge the gap between the upper and lower castes based on events in her personal life. (01:08:50)
- Her emotional sensitivity outlined in her relations with men is juxtaposed against Deepak's independent initiatives and academic excellence.
- She is not the face of the resistance movement demanding equitable access to education or the one against caste discrimination.



- Purvi is presented as a bystander in moments of Deepak's resistance against authorities. (00:46:55)



- Her obedient and non-confrontational nature is a significant characteristic of her contribution to the story.
- After the reconciliation of her familial and romantic discourse, her presence in the film is scarce.

## 2. Prerna (Dil, dosti, etc., *Manish Tiwary*, 2007)

- The film focuses on the university's student body elections and the incidents associated therewith.
- Prerna's discourse in the film is strictly restricted to her romantic/sexual affiliations with men.
- She is uninterested in politics and collective mobilization. She undermines Sanjay's student activism and calls his victory march "noise".
- There is a stark class divide between Sanjay and Prerna. His class consciousness as a "middle-class boy" is highlighted against her elitist ideals. (01:05:55)
- Prerna's class status is a strong aspect of her persona. She is presented as a rich and jubilant student who aspires to be a model. She admits to owning 5 cars and vast ancestral estates. (00:31:47)



- Prerna is depicted as holding unconventional views on sexual liberation, monogamy and infidelity. (01:07:14) This contributes to a negative portrayal of her sexual identity.

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- She is portrayed as an adulterer. She ultimately embodies a perfunctory lover who ends up cheating on Sanjay with his friend.
- Despite Sanjay's toxic and abusive behavior like controlling Purna's clothing, restricting her modelling aspirations, threat of gun violence (01:14:06), etc., he is not held accountable for his actions. However, Purna is held accountable for his death.



### 3. Radhika (Yuva, Mani Ratnam, 2004)

- The film focuses on the dangerous altercations materialized between student politics and mainstream politics wherein powerful actors of the latter resolve to inhibit the development of the former.
- Michael's discourse is heavily reliant on his heroic revolutionary ideals.
- The representation of Radhika is strictly restricted to her position as Michael's lover. Her screen time is very limited.
- She wears traditional Indian clothing throughout the film.
- Radhika is a cheerful woman supporting Michael in his endeavours by remaining in the backdrop of his far-reaching admiration. (00:55:15)



- Radhika is grossly represented in terms of her sexual relations with Michael. The couple's physical intimacy and her consequent pregnancy is a major aspect of her contribution to the plot.

- Serious matters of Radhika's personal life like her role as a teacher/volunteer, her pregnancy, and her familial conflicts with her guardians are not addressed in the film.
- Her involvement in activism is only within the purview of Michael's political endeavours. Upon his victory in state elections, she rejoices saying "we have won" to denote a collective success. (02:36:23)



4. Kiran (*Gulaal*, Anurag Kashyap, 2009)

- The film focuses on the overriding theme of power and politics whereby political muscle operates through student actors to fulfill a secessionist movement.
- The male student leadership dwindles between Ransa and Dilip but the female student leadership (Kiran) stays intact.
- Kiran is introduced as a timid young woman whose expressions and actions convey her helplessness but her character undergoes a drastic change.
- Her romantic and sexual affiliation with Dilip are the central focus of her discourse. Her pregnancy and subsequent abortion contributes to a gendered depiction of her priorities.
- Kiran's transgressive behavior is expressed through her sharp tongue, swearing language, smoking habits (01:16:00), aversion to motherhood, hatred towards her family rivals and cunning political agendas.



- The climax uncovers Kiran as a ruthless power-monger who weaponizes love and sex to seize leadership authority from Dilip.

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- She admits to “using people” to her advantage to further her motives. (02:05:14) Her image as an opportunist who maneuvers the complexities of her personal, familial and romantic life to advance her agendas is reinforced.



- Despite Kiran’s portrayal as a resolute woman, her brother is her protector and guardian in all possible matters of her life. For example, he disallows her from seeing their father and doesn’t let the opposition tamper with her election campaign. (00:30:17)



### 5. Niharika (Haasil, *Tigmanshu Dhulia*, 2003)

- The film focuses on the political rivalry between two student leaders which later transforms into violent crime affecting multiple stakeholders.
- Niharika is a sheltered upper-class college student. Her class consciousness is a dominant aspect of her discourse.
- She is presented as a sex icon desired by all men in the campus. Her traditional Indian clothing registers her conformity to stereotypical notions of female beauty. (00:58:03, 02:05:16)



- She is exclusively portrayed in terms of her romantic affiliation with Anirudh and the consequences she faces for the same.
- No aspect of her discourse except her relationship with the male protagonist is acknowledged in the film.
- She outlines the persona of an oppressed woman. Her family monitors her activities and deems her transgression as a blow to the family honour.
- She is commonly presented as being clad in a veiled burkha when meeting with Anirudh. (01:28:27) This outlines her fear of societal acceptance and familial boundaries.



- She abandons every institution of her life (family, education, society and safety) to elope with Anirudh.
- The resolution of the plot conveys her unconditional prioritization of love, romance and marriage over any other authority irrespective of its consequences.

6. Geeta (Hazon Khwaishein Aisi, *Sudhir Mishra*, 2005)

- The film focuses on the contesting ideologies of three young college students and their impact on personal and political hurdles.
- Geeta is a privileged woman who has studied abroad and speaks fluent English for the majority of the film. Inspired by her boyfriend's revolutionary thinking, she wants to explore the socio-political landscape of India.
- Her sober traditional clothing registers her conformity to the stereotypical image of feminine and sophisticated Indian women.
- Geeta's discourse in the film is heavily reliant on her male counterparts. Her actions are heavily influenced by Siddharth's movements. The mores of their relationship are central to her character. (01:15:43, 00:17:36)



- Her contribution to charitable work in a remote village is influenced by her companionship with Siddharth. It represents her romantic devotion and not her leadership. (00:44:53)



- Her depiction as the cheating wife paints her as the stereotypical indecisive woman who can't take rational decisions despite "having it all".
- Geeta's actions throughout the film display her unconditional dedication towards love and romance with Siddharth above all.
- The compromised resolution of the tussles in her romantic life is denoted as the resolution of her filmic discourse.

7. Anjali (Chakravyuha, M. Saravanan, 2016)

- The film focuses on a male student activist's independent initiative against corruption and political powerplay.
- Anjali is presented as a cheerful college student. She portrays youthful amusement and conventional romance in the film.
- Her character's portrayal is restricted to her role as Lohith's lover. Despite being treated with hostility and rejection, she continues to pursue him.

- The film infantilizes her by presenting her as an immature person. She takes “revenge” from Lohith for petty offences, whistles after seeing him on the news (01:07:29) and visits his house unannounced. (01:09:38)



- She is never addressed as a leader or a revolutionary thinker. Her dialogues and actions represent her only in terms of her romantic alliance with Lohith.
- She suffers humiliation and violence at the hands of Lohith and his rivals. (01:26:52) This is normalized in the film. Anjali does not react defensively about the same.



- She is rescued by Lohith in the film’s climax wherein she embodies the stereotypical image of a damsel in distress.

## Discussion

Based on the character analysis of the aforementioned female protagonists, the researcher establishes the following.

### 1. Reformist Ideological Inclination

A change-seeking revolutionary ideology that is grounded in reformation is the central guiding factor of modern-day student protest narratives. The cinema expands on the reformist notions of student activism and uses the same to define student leadership exclusively espoused by male figureheads.

### 2. Filmic Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes

Student protest films employ a gender-specific reinforcement of naturalistic traits and cultural values to distinguish the female experience from that of the male functionary.

### 3. Gendered Alienation of the Female Narrative

The female narrative is absent from the mainstream recollection of student activism and political leadership. The elimination of the female experience from the filmic representation of student activism alienates women from their authority in leadership domains.

## Conclusion

The qualitative character analysis of female protagonists in Hindi-cinema student protest films revealed three common patterns of character framing.

First, the films projected the male protagonists as superior Marxist leaders and decision-makers while the same was not applicable to their female counterparts. The filmic discourse of the protagonists reflected a gender-specific placement of political authority that exclusively resided with men. Second, there was an evident placing of stereotypical gender attributes onto the female protagonists' discourse which confined them to socially acceptable norms of expression. The same did not include leadership attributes such as those embodied in men. Third, a deliberate focus on the personal discourse of female protagonists led to a systematic 'othering' of them from the theme of student activism that was principally navigated by their male counterparts.

Thus, the underlying theme of gender politics is a central prerogative to the cinematic construction of student activism and a major reworking of the same is required to accommodate an egalitarian dialogue between male and female representatives of student protest culture.

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