



Religious Symbolism, Gender, and Nationalism: The Politics of Women's Bodies in Hindi Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how religious symbolism intersects with gender and nationalism in constructing women's bodies in Hindi cinema. Focusing on Bharat Mata, sacred motherhood, female purity, sacrifice, and cultural morality, it explores how religious-cultural imaginaries contribute to ideals of Indian womanhood and national identity. Selected Hindi films are analyzed alongside feminist theories of nationalism to identify how cinema reproduces and contests these gendered meanings. Women are frequently positioned as bearers of religious-cultural morality, family honour, and national purity, while masculine authority is legitimized through narratives of protection and control. Examining religion alongside gender and cinema reveals how sacred symbolism can shape, reinforce, and potentially challenge patriarchal constructions of nationhood in contemporary India.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nationalism is not merely a political project concerned with territory, sovereignty, and citizenship. It is also a cultural process through which societies construct ideas of belonging, morality, family, gender, and collective identity. Feminist scholarship has demonstrated that these processes are rarely gender-neutral, because nationalist narratives frequently assign different symbolic and social roles to men and women. Men are commonly positioned as protectors, political actors, and representatives of authority, whereas women are associated with motherhood, cultural continuity, morality, and national honour (McClintock, 1993; Nagel, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1997). The relevance of gender to political life also extends to contemporary political campaigns and community engagement, where gender can influence patterns of political participation and representation (Pranathi and Kamraju, 2024).

In the Indian context, the relationship between nationalism and gender has historically been shaped by distinctions between political modernity and the preservation of cultural identity. Colonial nationalism constructed a division between the material domain of politics, administration, science, and economic progress and the spiritual domain of culture, family, morality, and national authenticity (Chatterjee, 1989). Women were consequently positioned as important custodians of the inner cultural sphere and were expected to preserve the moral and cultural identity of the nation (Chatterjee, 1989). The continuing significance of women in the construction of Indian nationhood demonstrates that gender remains central to understanding the relationship between culture and nationalism.

This symbolic positioning of women produces a fundamental contradiction. Women may be elevated as representations of the nation while simultaneously experiencing limitations on their bodily, sexual, and social autonomy. Nationalist projects frequently reproduce familial structures in which masculine authority and feminine dependency become normalized (McClintock, 1993). Nationalism is also closely related to constructions of masculinity and sexuality, particularly through ideals of male protection, female respectability, and the regulation of sexual boundaries (Nagel, 1998). Women therefore occupy multiple positions within national projects as biological reproducers, cultural transmitters, and symbolic markers of collective identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Motherhood is particularly important within this gendered construction of national identity. Motherhood should not be understood solely as a biological experience because it may also operate as a social institution shaped by cultural expectations and patriarchal structures. When motherhood becomes associated with collective identity, women may be expected to reproduce future generations, preserve moral values, and transmit cultural traditions. These expectations can transform the maternal body into a symbolic site through which ideals of sacrifice, purity, responsibility, and national belonging are expressed.

This relationship is especially visible in Indian representations of the nation through maternal imagery. The figure of *Bharat Mata*, or Mother India, illustrates how womanhood, motherhood, culture, and nationalism can converge within a single symbolic representation. Within the broader framework of Indian nationalism, women have historically been associated with the preservation of the spiritual and cultural domain of national identity (Chatterjee, 1989). This symbolic elevation of women as guardians of cultural morality does not necessarily confer greater political or bodily autonomy, as symbolic honour can coexist with social subordination (McClintock, 1993).

The religious-cultural dimension of this symbolism is particularly important for the present study. In this context, religion is not treated only as institutional belief or ritual practice but also as a cultural field in which ideas of morality, motherhood, purity, sacrifice, and collective belonging acquire symbolic meaning. The association of women with the spiritual and cultural domain of the nation provides an important basis for examining how religious-cultural meanings become intertwined with gendered nationalism in India ([Chatterjee, 1989](#)). The concept of national identity must therefore be understood not only in political terms but also through the moral and symbolic structures that regulate gendered expectations. The intersection of religion and gender is also evident in contemporary research showing that both factors can contribute to differences in individual and social decision-making ([Situngkir et al., 2024](#)).

The regulation of women's sexuality constitutes another important dimension of gendered nationalism. Nationalist ideologies frequently regulate sexuality because reproduction, cultural continuity, and collective boundaries are central to the maintenance of national identity. Women's sexual behaviour can consequently become associated with family honour, community morality, and national integrity. The construction and protection of national boundaries are closely related to gender and sexuality because women are often expected to maintain respectability while men are positioned as defenders of collective honour ([Nagel, 1998](#)).

These gendered expectations also expose the limitations of separating public and private life. Family, sexuality, motherhood, and domestic relations cannot be treated as purely private matters because they are shaped by wider social, political, and cultural structures ([Peterson, 2000](#)). This perspective is particularly relevant to nationalist discourse because expectations surrounding women's bodies, marriage, sexuality, and family roles frequently operate within broader systems of social power. The regulation of women in supposedly private spaces may therefore contribute to the reproduction of national and cultural hierarchies. Gender issues within family settings further demonstrate how gender relations and expectations operate within everyday social life ([Boriongan and Abdulmalic, 2023](#)). Gender also remains an important dimension in educational settings, particularly in relation to students' interest, classroom participation, academic achievement, and academic performance ([Demalata et al., 2024](#)). Studies of technology-supported science education have similarly examined gender as a predictor of students' academic performance ([Bolaji et al., 2025a](#); [Bolaji et al., 2025b](#)).

The question of women's agency becomes essential within this framework. Gender justice requires recognition of women as autonomous individuals capable of making meaningful choices concerning their identities, responsibilities, families, and bodies ([Ray, 2019](#)). Gender issues continue to shape family life and everyday social relations ([Boriongan and Abdulmalic, 2023](#)). Gender inequality also extends into educational and institutional settings, where gender may intersect with region and field of expertise ([Purnomo et al., 2025](#)). Gender has likewise emerged as an analytical dimension within Islamic educational settings, including studies of self-health literacy across gender, grade level, and school context ([Khasanah et al., 2027](#)). Such a perspective challenges nationalist frameworks that define women primarily through their roles as mothers, wives, cultural transmitters, or symbols of collective honour. Recognizing women as active subjects rather than symbolic objects is therefore necessary for a more inclusive understanding of citizenship and national belonging.

These tensions between symbolism, morality, sexuality, and agency are also reproduced through popular culture. Hindi cinema is particularly significant because it has historically participated in constructing ideas of family, femininity, masculinity, morality, and national identity. Mainstream cinema can position women as visual and narrative objects within structures organized through masculine perspectives and desires (Mulvey, 1975). This theoretical perspective is useful for examining how women's bodies and identities are constructed within cinematic narratives.

The representation of women in Hindi cinema also reflects broader expectations concerning motherhood, purity, sacrifice, sexuality, and honour. Films such as *Mother India* construct motherhood as a powerful moral and national symbol, while later Hindi films negotiate tensions between modernity and traditional expectations of femininity. Female characters may appear modern, educated, or independent, yet their social acceptability often remains linked to family loyalty, sexual respectability, sacrifice, and conformity to culturally approved gender roles. These representations demonstrate how cinema can participate in the reproduction and negotiation of broader gendered ideals.

The marginalization of women's political agency is also relevant to cinematic representations of nationalism. Conventional narratives of nationalism frequently privilege masculine categories of leadership, political participation, and national action while treating women primarily through symbolic or supportive roles (Sluga, 2000). When women are represented predominantly as mothers, wives, daughters, victims, or bearers of collective honour, their identities as autonomous political and social subjects may become secondary. Symbolic inclusion within the nation can therefore coexist with practical exclusion from full agency.

This study examines the intersection of religious-cultural symbolism, gender, nationalism, and body politics in Hindi cinema. Particular attention is given to representations of motherhood, purity, sacrifice, honour, sexuality, and the female body, together with their relationship to *Bharat Mata* and culturally embedded ideas of ideal womanhood. The study investigates how Hindi cinema reproduces, negotiates, or challenges these constructions and how religious-cultural meanings become connected with nationalist representations of women. The novelty of this study lies in bringing the religious-cultural dimensions of Indian nationalism into direct conversation with feminist theories of gender, body politics, and cinematic representation. Rather than examining nationalism, gender, religion, or cinema as separate domains, this study analyzes how these dimensions interact in constructing women as moral, cultural, and symbolic bearers of the nation. This approach provides a framework for understanding how religious-cultural symbolism can contribute to the construction of gendered nationalism while also revealing tensions involving women's agency, bodily autonomy, and citizenship.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative interpretive approach to examine religious-cultural symbolism, gender, nationalism, and body politics in Hindi cinema. Selected films, including *Mother India* in 1957, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* in 1995, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* in 1998, *Badhaai Ho* in 2018, and *Kabir Singh* in 2019, were treated as cultural texts representing different periods and gendered narratives in Hindi cinema. The analysis focused on five themes: religious-cultural symbolism and sacred femininity; motherhood and national identity; purity, sexuality, and honour; masculine authority and protection; and women's

agency and bodily autonomy. These themes were interpreted using feminist perspectives on nationalism, motherhood, sexuality, and cinematic representation (Chatterjee, 1989; McClintock, 1993; Mulvey, 1975; Nagel, 1998; Ray, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Religious elements were examined as cultural symbols and narratives rather than as theological doctrines. Particular attention was given to *Bharat Mata*, sacred motherhood, purity, sacrifice, and moral expectations associated with ideal womanhood. The study also examined how films reproduce or challenge women's symbolic roles, sexuality, autonomy, and relationship to national identity. As the study relied on publicly available films and published literature, it involved no human participants or personal data. The findings are therefore interpretive rather than statistically generalizable.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hindi cinema constructs women's relationship with the nation through recurring ideas of motherhood, purity, sacrifice, family honour, sexuality, and masculine protection. These representations are not exclusively political; they also draw on religious-cultural meanings that give moral authority to particular models of womanhood. Across the selected films, women are frequently valued according to their ability to preserve family and cultural morality, while male characters are more commonly associated with protection, authority, and decision-making. At the same time, the films demonstrate that these constructions are not static, as some narratives increasingly question conventional expectations concerning women's agency and bodily autonomy.

3.1. Religious-Cultural Symbolism and Sacred Motherhood

One of the clearest findings concerns the symbolic relationship between motherhood and national identity. *Mother India* in 1957 represents Radha not simply as an individual mother but as a moral figure whose suffering, endurance, and sacrifice acquire broader collective significance. Her decision to uphold moral principles even at severe personal cost transforms motherhood into a symbol of social and national responsibility. The female body consequently becomes a site through which morality, sacrifice, and collective belonging are expressed.

This representation reflects the broader symbolic logic of *Bharat Mata*, in which the nation is imagined through the maternal body. Within Indian nationalism, women have historically been associated with an inner domain of spirituality, culture, family, and moral authenticity (Chatterjee, 1989). Motherhood can consequently move beyond personal experience and operate as an institution through which social expectations concerning femininity, sacrifice, and responsibility are established.

The religious dimension of this representation is significant because maternal femininity can acquire sacred cultural authority. The woman-as-mother is elevated as morally valuable while her individuality becomes secondary to her responsibilities toward family and community. This creates a paradox in which women receive symbolic reverence without necessarily receiving greater autonomy. The symbolic inclusion of women within national identity may therefore coexist with unequal gender relations (McClintock, 1993).

3.2. Purity, Family Honour, and Ideal Womanhood

A second major pattern concerns the connection between ideal femininity, sexual respectability, and family honour. Hindi cinema has historically distinguished culturally acceptable femininity from representations perceived as excessively Westernized or sexually independent. The ideal woman is commonly associated with modesty, family commitment, restraint, and moral respectability.

This pattern remains visible even when female characters appear modern. In *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* in 1995, romantic desire is ultimately negotiated within the authority of family and established cultural expectations. Female respectability remains closely associated with chastity and family honour. The narrative therefore accommodates romantic modernity without completely abandoning traditional gender expectations.

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai in 1998 presents another variation of this pattern. Anjali is initially represented as athletic, assertive, and relatively unconcerned with conventional femininity. Her later transformation into a more traditionally feminine appearance accompanies her positioning as a desirable romantic partner. Modern female identity becomes more socially acceptable when reconciled with culturally recognizable femininity.

Badhaai Ho in 2018 offers a different perspective by placing the sexuality and reproductive life of an older married woman at the center of family and social scrutiny. The pregnancy of the mother becomes a source of embarrassment and moral judgment for other family members, revealing how female sexuality and reproduction remain socially regulated even within marriage. The film nevertheless challenges these expectations by presenting motherhood and sexuality beyond conventional assumptions of age, respectability, and feminine behaviour.

Such representations demonstrate how national and cultural boundaries may be maintained through expectations surrounding gender and sexuality. Nationalism is closely connected with the regulation of sexuality because gendered respectability can function as a marker of collective identity (Nagel, 1998). Women consequently become important symbolic boundaries between culturally approved behaviour and behaviour interpreted as threatening established morality.

Table 1 demonstrates that the films differ considerably in historical period and narrative context, but several recurring patterns remain visible. Motherhood, family loyalty, sexual respectability, and feminine conformity repeatedly function as indicators of culturally acceptable womanhood. Conversely, masculine authority frequently appears through protection, control, or decision-making. These patterns support the argument that gendered nationalism operates not only through explicitly patriotic narratives but also through everyday representations of family, morality, sexuality, and relationships.

Table 1. Gendered and religious-cultural patterns in selected Hindi films.

FILM	DOMINANT REPRESENTATION	RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL / NATIONAL MEANING	GENDER IMPLICATION
<i>Mother India</i> in 1957	Sacrificial motherhood	Motherhood, morality, sacrifice, and nation	Woman becomes a moral symbol of collective identity
<i>Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge</i> in 1995	Chastity and family loyalty	Family honour and cultural continuity	Female choice remains negotiated through family authority
<i>Kuch Kuch Hota Hai</i> in 1998	Transformation toward conventional femininity	Socially approved ideal womanhood	Female desirability is connected with gender conformity
<i>Badhaai Ho</i> in 2018	Motherhood and reproductive identity	Family morality and expectations surrounding motherhood	Female sexuality and reproduction remain socially scrutinized
<i>Kabir Singh</i> in 2019	Masculine control over romantic relationship	Protection, authority, and gender hierarchy	Female agency is subordinated to dominant masculinity

3.3. Sexuality, Masculine Authority, and Control

The analysis also identifies control over women's sexuality as a persistent feature of cinematic gender relations. Women's choices concerning romantic relationships, sexuality, marriage, and mobility are frequently positioned within wider expectations of family morality. Such representations transform apparently private relationships into sites where cultural boundaries and gender hierarchies are maintained.

This finding is consistent with the argument that sexuality plays an important role in constructing national and collective boundaries (Nagel, 1998). The regulation of women's behaviour becomes particularly significant when female respectability is treated as evidence of family or community morality. The distinction between public and private life consequently becomes unstable because relationships within families and intimate partnerships reproduce broader structures of power (Peterson, 2000).

Kabir Singh in 2019 illustrates an intensified form of masculine authority. The male protagonist exercises substantial control over the female protagonist's movements, relationships, and personal choices. Aggressive behaviour and emotional domination are incorporated into the romantic narrative, while the female character is given comparatively limited space to assert independent decisions. The film therefore provides an important example of how dominant masculinity can be normalized through narratives of romantic attachment.

The construction of masculinity in this context is closely related to authority, possession, and protection. Nationalist gender relations frequently associate masculinity with power and the defence of boundaries, while femininity becomes associated with respectability and vulnerability (Nagel, 1998). Although *Kabir Singh* is not primarily a nationalist film, its gender relations reproduce a broader cultural structure in which masculine authority is privileged over female autonomy.

3.4. Women's Agency and Bodily Autonomy

Hindi cinema cannot be understood as uniformly reproducing patriarchal gender roles. Other Hindi films, such as *Pink*, *Astitva*, *Paheli*, *Mrityudand*, and *Kya Kehna*, also provide examples of narratives that give greater space to women's personal and sexual agency. These films challenge assumptions that women's morality should be determined primarily through obedience, chastity, family expectations, or masculine authority. Such challenges can also be situated within broader processes of changing gender norms, in which increasing gender sensitivity reflects ongoing social transformation (Daud and Caiber, 2027).

This shift is important because symbolic respect for women does not necessarily guarantee their ability to make meaningful choices. A gender-just perspective requires women to be recognized as autonomous subjects rather than primarily through relational identities such as mother, wife, daughter, or romantic partner (Ray, 2019). The question is therefore not simply whether women receive positive cinematic representations, but whether they are represented as possessing meaningful agency over their bodies and lives.

This distinction is especially relevant to religious-cultural representations of femininity. Sacred motherhood, purity, sacrifice, and devotion can provide women with symbolic status while simultaneously establishing restrictive standards of ideal womanhood. Feminist critiques of nationalism demonstrate that women may occupy central symbolic positions within the nation while remaining peripheral to structures of authority and decision-making (McClintock, 1993; Sluga, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

The findings therefore reveal a central tension between symbolic elevation and individual autonomy. Hindi cinema frequently celebrates women when they embody motherhood, morality, sacrifice, family loyalty, or sexual respectability, but these positive representations may remain conditional upon conformity to gendered expectations. Religious-cultural symbolism strengthens this process when particular forms of femininity acquire sacred or morally authoritative meanings. At the same time, cinematic narratives that foreground consent, agency, and bodily autonomy provide opportunities to challenge these established constructions.

Religion, gender, nationalism, and cinema intersect in this study primarily through religious-cultural symbolism and moral constructions of womanhood rather than through explicit theological discourse. Religious-cultural meanings contribute to the symbolic authority of motherhood, purity, sacrifice, and ideal femininity, while nationalist narratives connect these qualities with cultural continuity and collective identity. Hindi cinema both reproduces and contests these relationships. The movement from women as symbolic bearers of national morality toward women as autonomous subjects therefore represents an important transformation in the gendered imagination of nationhood.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that Hindi cinema constructs women through intersections of religious-cultural symbolism, gender, nationalism, and body politics. Motherhood, purity, sacrifice, family honour, sexuality, and feminine respectability repeatedly shape ideals of womanhood and national belonging. The symbolism of *Bharat Mata* demonstrates how the cultural and sacred elevation of womanhood can coexist with limitations on women's autonomy and bodily agency. Hindi cinema both reproduces and challenges these expectations by presenting women as moral symbols, family guardians, or autonomous subjects. Inclusive

nationhood requires moving beyond symbolic elevation toward recognition of women's agency, bodily autonomy, and equal citizenship in contemporary India.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper is free from plagiarism.

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