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The changing construction of women characters in popular Hindi-language cinema from 1970 to 2007

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Abstract

This study examines the changing construction of women characters in popular Hindi-language cinema from 1970 to 2007 using six films, typical of the genres at their times of release, as case studies: *Pakeezah* (1971, Kamal Amrohi), *Umrao Jaan* (1981, Muzaffar Ali), *Prem Rog* (1982, Raj Kapoor), *Salaam Namaste* (2005, Siddharth Anand), *Baabul* (2006, Ravi Chopra) and *Ta Ra Rum Pum* (2007, Siddharth Anand). The study examines general elements of Indian culture, religion, politics and economics in order to contextualise an understanding of Bollywood films as cultural products. The analysis reveals that in the films of the 1970's and 1980's, women characters were portrayed as docile and submissive, unable to articulate their needs even in the face of oppression, or as independent but cruel or hard-hearted; more specifically, women characters were portrayed as preservers of tradition. The 1980's began to witness a shift in the psyche of women characters, who displayed a need to break free of their environments, thereby rising above what is traditionally expected of Indian women, namely to show tolerance toward society and men, even when unjustly treated.

The findings suggest that more contemporary films show women characters as being more independent and making choices about family and work that are not based on traditional expectations of Indian womanhood. Links to some key findings from the literature are made.