

# Beyond Objectification: Fashion as a Medium of Women's Empowerment and Self-Expression

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## ABSTRACT

Fashion has often been viewed through the lens of objectification, where women's bodies are reduced to visual display, consumer appeal, and patriarchal standards of beauty. However, contemporary feminist discourse has increasingly begun to reinterpret fashion as a powerful medium of self-expression, identity formation, and personal agency. The present study, titled *Beyond Objectification: Fashion as a Medium of Women's Empowerment and Self-Expression*, examines how fashion moves beyond its conventional association with bodily display and becomes a language through which women negotiate freedom, confidence, individuality, and resistance. Instead of treating clothing merely as an instrument of attraction or social control, this study explores fashion as a cultural and symbolic practice that allows women to assert their choices, challenge stereotypes, and redefine their public presence.

The research focuses on the complex relationship between fashion, gender, body politics, and empowerment. It argues that fashion can function both as a site of objectification and as a space of liberation, depending on the context, intention, and agency of the woman who uses it. In popular culture, media, cinema, and everyday life, women's fashion is frequently judged by moral, aesthetic, and social standards. Yet the same fashion can also become a form of protest, creativity, and self-ownership. By analysing fashion as a medium of narrative construction, the study highlights how women use dress, style, appearance, and bodily presentation to tell their own stories rather than remain passive objects of the gaze.

This abstract further suggests that empowerment through fashion does not mean conforming to market-driven beauty ideals, but reclaiming the right to choose, represent, and define oneself. Thus, the study attempts to shift the discussion from objectification to agency, from visual consumption to self-expression, and from imposed identity to self-fashioned subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Fashion, Objectification, Women's Empowerment, Self-Expression, Female Agency, Body Politics

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## INTRODUCTION

According to a *Hindustan Times* report, Kangana Ranaut admitted that "Bollywood films do objectify women, not all of them but some of them do" ("Women Should Not Seek Approval from Others").

In Bollywood, Visual storytelling is an important part (Grant 45). Along with dialogue and music, many small details help in building a character and shaping the narrative. Among these, appearance plays a key role. The way Bollywood presents the female characters on the big screens is through colours, styles, and overall look, the appearance, often reflects her emotions, background, and situation (Chatterjee 72). Because of this, fashion becomes more than just decoration; it supports the story and adds deeper meaning to the character.

Earlier, this was not always the case. In many conventional films, women were shown in a limited and fixed manner (Prasad 118). "Item song," is one of the common examples, where the focus remained mostly on physical appearance. Costumes in such scenes were often designed to grab attention, and camera angles also highlighted the body more than the character (Mulvey, 132). Female characters were presented on screens more as visual objects but not as an individual who have emotions and depth.

In newer films, we can see that fashion is being used in a more meaningful way (Gokulsing 203). Female characters are now shown wearing clothes that match their personality and situation. It can be illustrated when a woman dealing with alienation and repression in life may be shown in simple and comfortable clothes. On the other hand, a working woman may wear outfits that show confidence and independence. This makes the character feel more real and relatable. Most of the time, they were shown only for beauty, songs, or as someone who supports the male lead (Dwyer, 56). Their own choices, thoughts, and struggles were not shown properly. Because of this, their roles often felt limited. Now, this

pattern is slowly changing. In many recent films, women are shown in a more real and strong way (Chatterji 149). Their characters have their own identity, and they are not just there for decoration. On camera they make decisions, facing problems, and standing for themselves. There are many films based on women and their experiences. They are shown as stronger, more independent, and more important to the storyline. Fashion is expression and this change can be noticed through fashion. It is remarkable to find that clothes in films are not just for style. They reveal the personality of the character is (Butler, 91). The way a character represents himself can talk about background, confidence, and even emotions. Sometimes, a small change in clothing hints that there is a sudden change in the mood of the character. At the same time, fashion has not always been used in a good way. There are films, especially that came in 1990s and we find that in those films more attention was given to how women look rather than who they are. Their appearance was highlighted in a way that made them seem more like something to look at than real individuals. This idea is linked to the concept of the “male gaze” given by Laura Mulvey, where women are shown mainly to attract male viewers.

But this is not the case in all films now. In many recent movies, fashion is used in a different and better way. It helps in showing confidence, independence, and personality. Clothes are not just about beauty anymore; they also help in showing the character’s journey.

Because of this, fashion in Bollywood can be seen in two ways. It has been used earlier to limit women, but now it is also helping to show them as strong and independent.

### **Fashion as a Tool of Objectification**

In mainstream Bollywood films, fashion has often been used in a way that focuses more on how women look rather than who they are (Dwyer, 61). Clothes, makeup, and styling are important to glorify female characters with sparkles of attraction on screen. As a result, their physical beauty becomes evocative, while their personality, thoughts, or role in the plot is subsidised. This creates an imbalance where appearance becomes more important than identity.

This idea is connected to what Laura Mulvey explained as the “male gaze.” (Mulvey, 140). If we take this concept seriously then we find that women characters in films are often used to attract male viewers. They are presented as cheer leaders associated with objectification while male characters are active and powerful. In many Bollywood films, this can be clearly seen by the dressing sense of female characters. The presentation of item songs clearly reveals it (Ganti 88). The popularity of these songs in Bollywood shows pure entertainment based upon glamour and beauty. In such songs we can find that female performers are usually dressed in impressive outfits. The focus hardly on their role in the main plot, but on their appearance and movements (Dwyer 61). The dance steps, expressions, and costumes are all well fabricated to attract the audience. Thus, we can understand that the woman in the song often becomes the centre of visual attraction rather than a character with depth. Camera work also plays an important role in this. In many scenes, the camera does not show the female character as a whole person. Instead, it focuses on different parts of the body, like the face, waist, or legs (Mulvey 132). This kind of presentation breaks the body into parts, which takes away the idea of the woman as a complete individual. It makes the audience focus only on physical features. This is what Mulvey (1975) refers to when she talks about women being reduced to something that is only meant to be looked at.

This kind of representation is not limited to item songs. It can also be seen in regular film scenes. Even when the story does not require it, female characters are often shown in glamorous clothes. For example, it is seen in many movies that a character who is supposed to be a student, a working-class lady, or someone from an ordinary background is still dressed in highly stylish outfits. These clothes, this fashion may look good on screen as it’s a cinema, but they do not always match the reality of the character’s life. This creates a gap between the character and real life and makes the scene unrealistic.

glamour overpowers realism in Bollywood for many years. Costumes are often appealing rather than realistic (Prasad 118). It ignites human desires and thus, it is beautiful to watch. It also changes the mindset of audiences to consider women as hot, bold and sexy. Reel glamour has nothing to do with the real people with everyday lives. They are polished and perfect because they are objectified. Personality is limited merely up to appearance and it is the aesthetic representation of art and cinema. It is not didactic in approach but centred around entertainment. Another issue is that this kind of fashion creates certain fixed ideas about beauty (Butler 97). Through movies, a standard, a mindset is being set that ideal women are those women, who have fair skin, slim body, does flawless makeup and wears stylish cloths etc. This can make it difficult for audiences to see different types of beauty and also to accept the reality as there are many women, who have different body-type, different skin-tone and they do not fit into the dimensions of this image, so, are rarely given equal importance on screen. Because of this, the representation becomes limited. It is only though these standards set by the Bollywood, in many places, cultures, Women are being judged by their appearance rather than their personality, behaviour and kindness. There are Scholars like Rachel Dwyer (2000), who have pointed out that this strong focus on beauty and glamour portrayed in the films, is not just about the films, but it also reflects society (Dwyer 56). When films repeatedly show women in this way, it strengthens the belief that a woman’s value is connected to her appearance. It also shows the mentality of the people, who thinks women not fitting in this image are ugly.

This gives an advantage to the patriarchal thinking, where women are expected to fit into certain roles under male dominance and control. In such a system, women are not seen as a human being but often seen as objects rather. Fashion, in this case, becomes a tool that encourages patriarchal ways of thinking. Instead of helping women to be independent and to express themselves, it is used to present them in a limited and controlled way.

As fashion plays an important role in film industry, it is important to understand that not all use of fashion is used to portray negativity. Fashion itself is not the problem, but the issue is how it is used in the film and by what purpose it is shown in the film. If fashion is used only to attract attention of the audience or highlight the body, it leads to objectification. But if it is used to portray the personality, growth, or identity, of the character, it can have a positive role. However, in many mainstream films, especially earlier ones, the focus has mostly been on appearance. There are also situations where female characters are given less importance in the story, but their appearance is still highlighted. This shows that even when their role is small, their visual presence is made strong (Ganti 45). It creates a situation where the character is remembered more for how she looks rather than what she does. This again shows how fashion can be used to reduce the importance of a character. Over time, audiences have also become used to this kind of representation. Since it has been repeated in many films, it feels normal. But it becomes clear that this kind of portrayal does not give a complete or fair picture of women, when looked into depth. It shows that how only one side of story is portrayed and it ignores many other aspects of their identity. But yes, in recent years, there has been some change in this pattern of Bollywood, but the influence of earlier styles can still be seen in many movies. Many films are now trying to present women in a more balanced way, empowering them, but elements of objectification still remain in some parts of cinema, especially in commercial films. Fashion in Bollywood always focus on appearance in comparison to identity. It encourages the audience to see the character of women both in reel and real life as objects rather than as full individuals. The role of the women is affected by how women are presented in Bollywood movies.

### **The Male Gaze and Cinematic Representation**

In the beginning chapter of the present research work the idea of male gaze has been discussed but in the present chapter it has more connections and parallels as the chapter focuses on fashion and objectification. In movies if Bollywood, women are presented in such a way that it is termed “male gaze”. This is an idea by a writer named Laura Mulvey, she talked about this idea first. She basically explained that most movies are made and directed from a man’s point of view. In these stories, the men are the ones doing all the active stuff, while the women are mostly just there to look good on camera. If it is put in even simpler terms, the male gaze is what happens when a woman’s looks are treated as more important than her actual personality or her role in the movie. We can understand it by noticing minute details like a slow-motion camera shot where the female protagonist or characters walks in. The camera focuses on her fair legs and the message becomes viral that even the legs of women are fair and so beautiful. This can be found in so many Bollywood films. These little tricks are noteworthy because they are used quietly in the cinema. Women are attractive and beautiful and her role play centres around her skin colour and body fitness. She can be intelligent with an individuality superior to male hero but it hardly matters. What matters is her sparkling hairs and dazzling eyes mixed with sensuality and body fitness. The camera work is smart and it reveals that it is the third eye that becomes functional with creativity already stuffed with stereotypical mentality. The cameraman follows the director and we can clearly notice that when a female character is introduced, the camera lens rolls slowly over her body, focusing on her looks instead of showing her character or importance in the story. It ignites the sensory glands of the audience and they become soft target of the block buster. This visual representation of women makes the audience notice her appearance first, instead of her role in the story. In contrast, male characters are usually introduced through action or dialogue, which shows their importance in the narrative.

Lighting is another way this is done. Mainly, Female characters in the Indian cinema are often portrayed in soft lighting, with perfect makeup and styling, without any scars so that they look flawless on screen. It shows that beauty is more focused in films rather than personality. In some scenes, where the situation is serious and intense, the character’s appearance is so highly maintained, that makes the scene feel unrealistic.

Apart from dress selection, fashion and artificial beauty there is an important aspect associated with Bollywood that is the Choreography and song sequences. It plays a big role in maintain proper balance between the plot and the setting. In many Bollywood songs, especially romantic women are often presented in a stylized way (Chatterji 72). Their movements, expressions, and clothes are all in a coherence. There is a fine sequence of such expressions that make them look attractive. The camera often follows their body movements closely, which again highlights physical appearance. This is not just about dancing, but about how the body is shown to the audience (Ganti 88). Fashion becomes very important in this whole process. Clothes are wisely chosen in a way that appeals to human senses. It further creates an idea of visual attraction among audiences and they are greatly moved. It is needless to say that glamorous outfits, fitted dresses, or revealing costumes are often employed to make female characters stand out digitally. Even when the story is incapable to generate interest among the audience and it does not require such clothing, it is still included to gain attention. It can be one of the reasons that fashion becomes a tool that supports the male gaze. There are so many films that objectify female body to gain attraction of the audiences. In traditional film entitled *Beta* actresses Madhuri Dixit performed on the song *Dhak Dhak Karne Laga* in a way where the focus was more on her body movements and expressions. Similarly, Katrina Kaif in songs like *Sheila Ki Jawani* is presented mainly as a glamorous girl. Sheila can

be anyone who is trying to show her youthful days. The camera, costume, and dance all work together to create a strong visual image, but the character itself does not have much depth in that moment. Another example can be seen in many romantic films where the female lead is shown through slow-motion entries, wind blowing through hair, and soft music in the background. These scenes are designed to make the character look attractive and dreamy. While this may look beautiful, it also shows how much importance is given to appearance.

However, it is also important to understand that the idea of the male gaze is not fixed. It is not something that stays the same in all films. Over time, filmmakers have started to question this way of showing women. There is a growing effort to present female characters in a more real and balanced way. In some recent films, if seen by concentration, the camera mostly focuses on expressions, emotions, and actions rather than the body parts, or physical appearance. For example, in the film *Queen (2014)*, there is a character Rani, played by Kangana Ranaut, in that film, she is not shown in a glamorous or stylized way most of the time. Her dressing sense is simple and it perfectly shows her situation in the movie. It focuses more on her journey and personal growth rather than her appearance. Similarly, in *Kahaani (2012)*, there is a sense of realism associated with the character sketch of the female protagonist played by Vidya Balan. She is a strong woman who stands firmly with her decisions. The camera captures her actions and decisions instead of focusing on her womanly charms. This is an example of how the male gaze can be reduced or even avoided. Films like *Pink (2016)* also show a different approach. The female characters are not dressed up in glammers way, or unnecessary makeup on the appearance but they are kept simple as normal life. The story gives importance to their voices, their choices, and their struggles. In such films, the audience don't see women as an object but as an individual. The influence of the male gaze still hasn't completely gone away from Bollywood but it is changing. If looked at many commercial films, especially songs and promotional scenes, it can be still seen the old style being used. Filmmakers focus more on glamour and visual appearance rather than portraying the character as they are. It is noteworthy to find that people are aware and they understand the demand of the time. Filmmakers, audiences, and even critics are starting to question the pre-established notions of the society. Camera angles, fashion, and storytelling are important segments in a blockbuster cinema. There is a sudden shift on focus and it is gradually changing—from just appearance to a woman's identity and individuality. The progress may be slow, but it is clearly moving in a better direction.

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