



# From Vamp To Heroine: Shift In The Characterization Of Female Lead In Bollywood

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**Abstract:** The paper delves into the portrayal of female lead characters in Bollywood movies, examining the shift from traditional gender norms to a more contemporary viewpoint. Traditionally, Hindi films have depicted the female lead as the epitome of an ideal woman who adheres to societal expectations, while modern women have often been portrayed as the antagonists. However, as attitudes change, the portrayal of female characters has also undergone a transformation. This research paper scrutinizes the evolution of female characters in Bollywood by comparing the positive and negative roles played by women in Hindi films. The objective is to emphasize how certain attributes once associated with negative female roles are now presented as part of the heroine's personality, without being viewed in a negative light.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, Heroine, Vamp, Traditional Gender Roles

## BACKGROUND

Cinema is believed to entertain, to take the viewer to a world that is different from the real one, a world that provides an escape from the daily grind of life. Cinema is a popular media of mass consumption that plays a key role in moulding opinions, constructing images, and reinforcing dominant cultural values. It has always been a reflection of society, portraying its attitudes, lifestyle, and culture. Themes, narratives, and characters in the films are reflective of prevalent social values, traditions, and customs, offering a cinematic representation of the broader cultural landscape. Therefore, as society changes, so does the cinema. In India, gender norms have long been deeply ingrained in society, dictating how men and women should behave. Bollywood films play a role in shaping and challenging societal norms relating to gender, offering diverse representations of men and women and contributing to the ongoing discussions about gender roles.

Bollywood represents the Hindi film industry which has its center in Bombay (present-day Mumbai). It originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with its first silent feature film in 1913, Raja Harishchandra. Since then it has kept on growing tremendously and emerged as a significant force of entertainment.

Over time, some of these norms have evolved while others have remained the same. One of the most visible changes can be seen in the portrayal of female characters in Bollywood movies, which is called the “heroine” of the film. However, today's Bollywood heroine is presented in a much different light, having undergone a major transformation in terms of characterization on the big screen.

## OBJECTIVES

- 1) To understand the dichotomy between the female protagonist and female antagonist in Bollywood
- 2) To analyze the portrayal of Vamps in Bollywood
- 3) To understand the similarities between Heroines and Vamps

## THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN HEROINE AND VAMP

The term “heroine” traditionally refers to the female protagonist or main character in a literary work, play, film, or other narrative form. The depiction and characteristics assigned to heroines vary across cultures and periods, providing insight into prevailing attitudes toward women. Historically, Bollywood has often depicted women in traditional roles, emphasizing virtues such as purity, sacrifice, and familial duty. The “ideal” woman was portrayed as someone who conforms to societal expectations, upholding family values and often sacrificing personal aspirations for the greater good. Traditionally, the Bollywood heroine was depicted as a saree-clad, modestly dressed, cultured 'Sanskari' woman who was soft-spoken, delicate, family-oriented, nurturing, and caring. She was admired for her selflessness and adherence to traditional gender roles. The heroine often serves as the moral center of the story. Her character is central to the narrative, and her journey typically involves overcoming obstacles while upholding virtues.

To delineate the role of a refined woman, a common trope is to create a dichotomy between the heroine and the vamp. Each is imbued with a distinct set of contrasting attributes that are evident in their appearance, behavior, lifestyle choices, habits, and opinions. The heroine adheres to societal norms while the vamp charts her course. The vamp is portrayed as morally deviant, bold, and often ambitious. She challenges societal norms and is unapologetic about her desires. Her role is to create conflict in the story, often by disrupting the harmony in the protagonist's life. She may be involved in schemes, deceit, or romantic entanglements that pose a threat to the heroine's virtuous existence.

The depiction of vamps in Hindi cinema has adhered to a distinct formula from the 1930s and 40s until the late 90s. The likes of Helen, Shashikala, Aruna Irani, and Bindu made a name for themselves in the 1960s for their portrayals of vampish characters, embodying a persona of a daring, unrestricted, and sensual woman with a Westernized perspective. (Kumar,2014)

According to the analysis made by Clare Wilkinson-Weber in 2005, the vamp character portrayed in movies was not only exceptionally charming but also considered inappropriate for decent female viewers to imitate. The vamp character was closely associated with the notion of "anti-Indianness," which was a colonial imposition on Indian culture (Rao 2010:7; Wilkinson-Weber 2005). It was believed that Western attire and clothing that were deemed too revealing and risqué embodied modern values and the seductive influences of the West. Therefore, vamps in movies were frequently seen wearing Western dresses, as this was a way of expressing the rejection of traditional Indian values and embracing the modernity of 'anti-Indianness' that was imposed by colonialism (Rao, 2010). Western attire, anything that was too revealing, and also personified modern conventions and the temptations of the West. Hence, western dress was commonplace for vamps, because to identify with the West was to deny the virtues of Indian tradition.

Based on the analysis of some of the Hindi films, following differentiation can be made between the heroine and the vamp.

ASPECTS	HEROINE	VAMP
Appearance	Traditional	Modern
Dressing style	Conservative	Bold
Attitude	Docile	Assertive
Virtue	Selfless	Ambitious
Sexuality	Limited	Explicit
Social Acceptance	Conforms to Societal norms	Deviates from Societal norms

## WHAT MAKES A VAMP

It is unfortunate that female characters in Bollywood films have often been depicted unfavorably for exhibiting ambition, pursuing careers, embracing fashion, engaging in self-care and leisure activities, asserting their sexuality, and being assertive.

Even in the 90s and 2000s when women had made significant strides in the public sphere and were portrayed as modern and strong in Hindi films, they were still subjected to the stereotypical ideal of a woman conforming to traditional expectations. These differences are prominently visible in Hindi films, where the contrast between positive and negative roles can be seen in the attire of women, displaying their adherence to traditional gender roles. For example, in the movie 'Judai', a contrast is drawn between the characters played by Urmila and Sridevi. Urmila's character, a modern woman, is initially depicted wearing Western attire before marriage, but afterward, she shifts to a more subdued look with simple sarees. Meanwhile, Sridevi's character is portrayed as indulging in opulent clothing, self-care, entertainment, and parties, which serves to cast her in a negative light.

In certain Bollywood films, female characters are frequently typecast based on their attire choices. Take, for example, 'Maine Pyar Kiya', where Bhagyashree's character is portrayed as a simple, cultured 'good girl' who dons modest salwar suits. On the other hand, Pervin Dastur's character, Seema, is portrayed negatively with her Western style of dressing and living. Similarly, in 'Biwi No. 1', Karishma Kapoor's character, who plays the role of a wife, always wears sarees, exhibiting all the hallmarks of marriage, such as sindoor and mangalsutra. However, Sushmita Sen's character, the other woman in the movie, wears cropped tops, skirts, and Western dresses, showcasing a modern dressing style that not only reveals her skin but also enables her to demonstrate her sexual independence.

In 'Aaina', Amrita's character Roma is depicted differently from her sister Reema, portrayed by Juhi Chawla. Roma, the older sister, is shown as a negative figure because of her excessive ambition, whereas Reema is presented as the archetypal good girl. Roma desires to pursue a career in modeling, but her fiancé Ravi (Jackie Shroff) puts a halt to her aspirations. 'Aitraaz' follows a similar pattern, where Priyanka Chopra's character Sonia has to give up her relationship with Raj (Akshay Kumar) to achieve success as a model. In contrast, Kareena Kapoor's character Priya, who was initially depicted as a lawyer keen on working in the field, abandons her ambition and settles into married life.

Times have changed, and so have societal expectations. Many things that were once considered immoral or rebellious for the heroine and were associated with a negative female character have become increasingly acceptable as normal for female protagonists. This has not only blurred the lines between the heroine and the vamp but also made the character of heroines more free and human by detaching it from the persona of a Devi (Hindu Goddess), who is an ideal woman, away from human mistakes and desires.

## THE FUSION OF THE HEROINE AND THE VAMP

In recent times, the line between heroines and vamps has become increasingly blurred. Today's heroines are portrayed in a modern light that allows them to shed the traditional stereotypes that have long been attached to their characters. On screen, their appearance, attitude, and behavior are explicitly visible, showcasing a gradual yet fascinating change that minimizes the contrast between heroines and vamps that was once clearly portrayed. Although the blurring of a clear demarcating line had started in the 70s with the advent of actresses like Zeenat Aman, Dimple Kapadia, and Parveen Babi, who were able to create a grey area between the black and white of vamps and heroines (Kishore, 2014), the acceptance of their display of vamp like modernity was low. It is only now that the characterization of female protagonists includes many elements that were previously considered negative and associated with vamps. The heroines can be ambitious, career-driven, bold, rebellious towards societal norms, sexually expressive, and assertive, just like Kangana Ranaut's character in Tanu weds Manu, Kareena in *Ki and Ka*, Priyanka in *Fashion*, or Sara in *Love aaj kal 2*. Although these characters are the protagonists, they carry the confidence of the vamps. To better understand this shift, let's break down some of the characteristics possessed by female leads in the 2000s that show similarities to female antagonists. If we talk about ambition, we can see our heroines being unapologetically ambitious today. Kareena in *Ki and ka* is shown as a highly ambitious woman who works hard and has set her eyes on the position of the CEO of the company she works in. There is a scene in the movie when she explicitly shows anger and worry at the

apprehension of being pregnant as she thinks it will come in her way to achieve her goals at that point of time in her life. Arjun Kapoor who plays her husband is shown to be supportive of this decision of hers. This is in complete contrast to the traditional expectations held from heroines who are expected to cherish motherhood above all things especially their careers, which is why Priyanka's character not wanting to be a mother in *Aitraaz* makes her an evil person.

Another parameter for separating vamps from heroines was the consumption of intoxicants by vamps.

*sharab yahan pr ek kharab character ki nishani maana jata hai, ladkiyon ke liye. Ladko ke liye nhi. Ladko pr ye apply nhi hota. Ladko ke liye ye sirf ek health hazard hai.* – Dialogue from the movie *Pink* (2016).

In the past, consuming alcohol and other intoxicants was often associated with the character of a vamp and was depicted as a habit of bad character in films. For instance, in the movie *Dulhan Hum Le Jaenge* (2000), when Karishma Kapoor's character drinks and dances at a bar in a foreign country where she gets harassed by some men, Salman Khan's character slaps her and blames her for inviting attention by leaving her Indian traditional culture and behaving like a foreigner. However, nowadays, drinking and smoking by heroines is considered normal. In movies like *Bareilly Ki Barfi* (2017) and *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhaniya* (2014), small-town girls coming from simple families like Bitti (Kriti Sanon) and Kavya (Alia Bhatt) are shown consuming alcohol, but this does not represent them as women of bad character in any way. When examining the sexuality and desires of female protagonists, it becomes apparent that heroines today possess greater sexual autonomy compared to their predecessors, perhaps even rivaling that of the classic vamps. The depiction of female sexuality on screen has undergone a notable evolution over the years, as evidenced by various films like *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta, *Dirty Picture* (2011), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *Veere Di Wedding* (2018), and *Thank You For Coming* (2023) (Malhotra, 2023). These movies feature women confidently exploring their sensual desires. For instance, *Dirty Picture* features a protagonist inspired by the legendary South Indian actress Silk Smitha. Vidya Balan delivers a bold performance, embodying the character's unapologetic use of her sexuality to advance her career. The character's persona never doubts her decision to leverage her sexuality to achieve her goals. Similarly, in *Band Bajaa Baraat* (2010), the female lead played by Anushka Sharma is depicted as pragmatic in moving forward after a one-night stand with the male lead (Kaur, 2018). These heroines are not only owning up to their desires but also their bodies. A subtle expression of owning one's body can be seen in a scene from *Love Aaj Kal 2* (2020), when Sara Ali Khan's character Zoe opens the top button of her shirt before entering a job interview. When called out for using her sensuality to impress the interviewers, she claims that she had done it for herself, to look good because when she looks good she feels more confident.

One's appearance is often the initial basis for judgments of their personality. In Bollywood films, heroines are typically depicted wearing traditional clothing while vamps are portrayed in revealing attire, possibly indicating a more Westernized personality. Traditionally, Bollywood heroines wore Indian costumes that represented womanhood and nationalism, whereas the vamps had the freedom to select more glamorous, modern Western clothing associated with excess. (Rao, 2010). This demarcation between vamps and heroines has diminished as the heroines too are presented in glamorized versions depicting a shift from traditional to modern. From Poo in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* to Neha in *Dostana* to Katrina in *Dhoom 3* to a more recent Nisha in *Tu Joothi Mai Makkar* (2023) and Rubia in *Pathan* (2023), have all flaunted their bodies in fashionable clothes.

## CONCLUSION

Bollywood has changed over the years as a result of changes in society under the influence of Westernization and modernization. Women in Indian society have become empowered and independent. This change in the position of women is also reflected in the ways women characters are portrayed on screen. A major shift can be identified in the ways Bollywood's leading ladies are presented with their roles transforming from traditional to modern. What is interesting is that this transformation in the character of heroines has brought them closer to the characters of the vamps in Hindi films. The traits of character displayed by vamps such as assertiveness, bold sense of dressing, rebelliousness to social norms, ambitiousness, etc. are now acceptably associated with the leading ladies. From this, it can be concluded that what was earlier unacceptable to the society and considered evil because of a traditional and conservative outlook can now be accepted as normal. The women

who challenged the traditional norms of society and displayed control over their lives by not being docile became the vamps in movies. However, such women today are presented as heroines in Bollywood which completes their journey from vamps to heroines.

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