

Does Bollywood Treat Women Fairly in “Comedy”? A Mixed Methods Analysis of Recent Ensemble Comedies

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Abstract

Women’s talent is still untapped in “scripted by others” formats like television and film comedy. In Indian TV comedies, women are present in supporting roles with feminine stereotypes, often mocked by the male actors. Better scripted comedy roles for women can help achieve woman’s emancipation through humour, and address their marginalization in the comedy genre. The Emerging Paradigm of “participation” within Development Communication guides the present study, and views development as liberation in the socio-feminist context. Studies examining women’s representation in Indian comedy are scarce, and there is a dearth of works that examine their characterization in ensemble comedies. Here, the “Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods” approach checks the balance between male and female comic representation in recent Bollywood ensemble comedies. Quantitative and Qualitative analyses show that women are largely under-represented in this Bollywood comedy genre; only one film in the sample, *Fukrey* (2013) had a female comic personality.

Keywords: Women, female, comedy, ensemble, Bollywood

Introduction

Wagner (2011) and Karlyn (1995) refer to the emancipatory effects of comedy on female creators as it helps in breaking gender stereotypes and igniting transformation. While development is strongly visible in contemporary open spaces such as stand-up comedy, TV and film

comedy are still struggling to give women their due credit as comedians. As humour has a liberating quality to it, it's no wonder that women are still fighting for their rights as comedians. Wagner highlights how the comedy genre is increasingly masculine when she says, “comedians deliver *punch* lines and *kill* their audiences” (2011, p. 37). She further adds,

Countless writers and critics have argued that femininity and a sense of humor are mutually exclusive and that women's ‘natural’ inclination toward emotion and sensitivity has left them incapable of possessing a quality—humor—that many feel is dependent on ‘masculine’ traits such as intellect and aggressiveness. (p. 35)

Women's domesticity has led to cementing of perceptions implying her proclivity to emotions rather than the intellect. Jenkins quotes a *Graham's Magazine* contributor saying, “There is a body and substance to true wit, with a reflectiveness rarely found apart from a masculine intellect.... The female character does not admit of it” (1992, p. 256). In a *Mint* article, Bhatia (2020) discusses the paucity of comedy roles for women in Bollywood and perhaps a wariness felt by younger female actors about being perceived as funny. Past studies have looked into female character portrayals (Smith et al., 2014; Nandakumar, 2011) and film script “writing and development processes” (Taylor, 2015). Taylor argues that perhaps discrimination in pre-production stages leads to stagnation of women's comic opportunities even in Hollywood productions.

Research Design

The present study intends to inquire into male and female representation in recent contemporary Bollywood ensemble comedies. The researchers have employed *Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods* approach beginning with a quantitative data collection and analysis of the selected film sample. The results from this phase assist in generating a hypothesis, followed by its testing. Favorability or unfavourability of the quantitative results towards women's inclusion in the comedy films would decide the need for a qualitative analysis. Following are the research questions of the study:

1. Are there more male characters in the lead as compared to the females?
2. Do women exhibit any comic persona in such films? If not, which characteristics limit the scope of their comicality?

Women's Empowerment and Development Communication

The present model of development adopted in times of globalization and inter-dependency among nations calls for increased participation by all sections of society. The current discourse focuses on intersectionality, advocating inclusion of all, irrespective of caste, class, creed, gender, and sexual orientation. Under this paradigm, the inclusion of marginalized sections and their empowerment are given primacy. Freire (1983), a proponent of participatory communication encourages everyone to speak for themselves, instead of someone speaking for them.

In this light, women's comic presence in cinema is worthy of investigation to explore their voice as 'comics'. Their alleged 'un-funniness' becomes stark when viewed against the quirky, mischievous, and witty male characters, thereby highlighting imbalanced characterizations and biases in script writing processes. Films with an ensemble cast of four or more mixed gendered actors in the lead along with some supporting roles become easy sources of comparison between male and female performances. "An ensemble cast is a method of dramatic production in which all members of the cast have equal amounts of screen time and importance" (Kanematsu et al., 2019, p. 1). This form of casting promises a "sense of collectivity and community at odds with the structure of protagonism" (Mathijs, 2011, p. 89).

This study's backdrop are stereotypes like women are unfunny or men that impress with their humour (Hitchens, 2007). Globally, comediennes have faced prejudice by audiences based on their gender. In India, stand-up comediennes like Neeti Palta and Aditi Mittal have addressed this issue in their performances. Others are regularly confronted with absurd questions during press interviews. A'Court (2014), a New Zealand comedienne reveals what it means being a 'female comedian':

Every year, many times each year, I've been interviewed for print, radio and television and asked whether I think women are funny. Or whether they're as funny as men. Or whether it is harder to do comedy if you're a woman. Or why there are fewer women than men in the industry. Or some other gender-angled query about the work I do. (2014, para. 2)

Today, female comedians are reclaiming the 'fun' in funny in a unique and unabashed way all over the world, writing their own scripts and thus, taking authority over their representation as comedians. But, in scripted formats like TV and film comedy, women's comedic talent is still

unexplored. This, and the overall dearth of scholarly focus on women’s participation and representation in Indian comedy is the impetus behind the present study.

Method

The drive behind the present study was to capture the unequal representation of women versus men in the comedy genre. To this end, the present investigation beckoned the researcher to “collect and analyze the data, integrate the findings, and draw inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study” (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4).

With Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods research design, the first part of the study involves quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by a qualitative study. The first phase of the study (quantitative) provided an understanding of the preliminary opportunities accorded to male and female actors in Bollywood incumbent at the level of their inclusion in a comedy-genre dominated film. The researchers realized the grave paucity of female leads in such films; this necessitated the inquiry into the types of roles women essay in comedies. The question is do films attribute comic, quirky, witty, humorous, and sarcastic traits to women characters. And if the answer is negative, and women largely lack humorous traits, then it’s important to unmask the reasons that prevents women’s comicality. Conceptual Content Analysis of the film sample helps in quantifying and qualifying ‘representation’ of the genders, particularly identifying thematic characterizations of women in such films, either complementing comedy or preventing it from being realized.

Sampling

Mixed (male and female genders) ensemble Bollywood comedy films were selected for the study. Of the roughly thirty films released between 2012-21, ten films were randomly selected through probability sampling, representing mainstream and commercial cinema. Here is the list in descending order of release:

- *Bhoot Police* (Kripalani, 2021)
- *Ludo* (Basu, 2020)
- *Chhichhore* (Tiwari, 2019)

- *Total Dhamaal* (Kumar, 2019)
- *Housefull 4* (Samji, 2019)
- *Golmaal Again* (Shetty, 2017)
- *Saat Uchakkey* (Sharma, 2017)
- *Welcome Back* (Bazmee, 2015)
- *The Shaukeens* (Sharma, 2014)
- *Fukrey* (Lamba, 2013)

Results

Quantitative Measurement of Male-Female Representation

Below, Table 1 presents the ratio of male lead actors versus female actors, as found from the film sample:

Table: *Ratio of male versus female actors (lead)*

<i>Nane of the Film</i>	<i>No. of Males (M)</i>	<i>No. of Females (F)</i>	<i>Ratio of M/F</i>
Bhoot Police	3	2	3:2
Ludo	5	3	5:3
Chhichhore	6	1	6:1
Total Dhamaal	5	1	5:1
Housefull 4	3	3	3:3
Golmaal Again	5	2	5:2
Saat Uchakkey	7	1	7:1
Welcome Back	6	3	6:3
The Shaukeens	3	1	3:1
Fukrey	4	3	4:3
	Average ($\mu 1$): 4.7	Average ($\mu 2$): 2	

In films with a team of actors, the chances for unequal or unfair representation are greater. We need to spot the number of women in the ensemble as compared to the men. From Table 1, we learn that *Housefull 4* is the only film with an equal ratio of male-female representation.

Hypothesis Formulation and Testing

From Table 1, we can infer that average male actors i.e. μ_1 is more than that of female actors i.e. μ_2 in the two samples, the hypothesis needs to be tested for the ensemble comedy film population of the last decade.

Null Hypotheses, $H^0 : \mu_1 = \mu_2$, i.e. Average number of males = Average number of females
Alternate Hypothesis, $H_1 : \mu_1 > \mu_2$ i.e. Average number of males > Average number of females

Number of films in the sample (n) = 10

For testing the above hypothesis, *t-test* would be beneficial as we need to compare the means of two data sets, each informing about the distribution of male and female actors in the lead respectively. After comparing the average or means of the two data sets (See Table 1), we can assume that the entire film population shows a greater male presence than female in the lead. It is time for testing this assumption by applying the formula for *comparison of two means* i.e. comparing μ_1 with μ_2 . Using the formula,

$$t = \frac{x_1 - x_2}{s\sqrt{1/n_1 + 1/n_2}}$$

$$s^2 = \frac{n_1 s_1^2 + n_2 s_2^2}{n_1 + n_2 - 2} \quad \text{gives us 's'}$$

x_1 and x_2 are the respective sums of the two samples

s_1 and s_2 are the standard deviations of the two samples,

n_1 and n_2 are the respective samples sizes of the two samples,

s is the pooled standard deviation.

The Level of Significance i.e. α is 5% which means that the probability of committing Type 1 error is 5%.

Computing the calculated values in the formula for t above, $t = 3.68$

By comparing t with t_c (critical value of t), we realize that

$t (3.68) > t_c (1.73)$ (See Appendix)

Thus, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis. This proves that the average male actors is greater than that of females in Bollywood ensemble comedy films released between 2012-21.

Qualitative Evaluation of Women's Comic Persona

If one describes something as 'comic', we imply that it makes us laugh and is intended to make us laugh. Sometimes, the fictional characters may even unintentionally say or do things that ends up in amusement or hardcore laughter. To identify the presence/absence of comic persona in the films, the researchers extracted codes describing the persona of the female lead in all the films. These codes were inspired from their verbal and non-verbal language behaviour (See Table 2).

Table 2: A representation of codes defining female persona in the films

<i>Name of the Film</i>	<i>Female Lead</i>	<i>Codes Defining Persona</i>
<i>Fukrey</i>	Richa Chadha (<i>Bholi Punjaban</i>) Priya Anand (<i>Priya</i>) Vishakha Singh (<i>Neetu Singh</i>)	Local gangster, bold and witty, sarcastic and dark humour, offbeat dressing style, active. Simpleton, "girl next door", "love interest" of a male character, naïve, passive. Uptight, teacher, solemn, "love interest" of two men.
<i>Fukrey</i>	Richa Chadha (<i>Bholi Punjaban</i>) Priya Anand (<i>Priya</i>) Vishakha Singh (<i>Neetu Singh</i>)	Local gangster, bold and witty, sarcastic and dark humour, offbeat dressing style, active. Simpleton, "girl next door", "love interest" of a male character, naïve, passive. Uptight, teacher, solemn, "love interest" of two men.
<i>The Shaukeens</i>	Lisa Haydon (<i>Ahana</i>)	Passive, "love interest" of 3 men, dim-witted.
<i>Welcome Back</i>	Shruti Haasan (<i>Ranjana</i>), Sakshi Maggo (<i>Rajkumari</i>) Dimple Kapadia (<i>Poonam</i>)	"Love interest" of two male characters, passive. "Love interest" of two men, emphasis on her looks, con woman, passive. "Love interest" of a male character, con woman, passive.
<i>Saat Uchakkey</i>	Aditi Sharma (<i>Sona</i>)	Tricks men by seducing them, "love interest" of four men, passive.

<i>Golmaal Again</i>	Tabu (<i>Ana Mathew</i>) Parineeti Chopra (<i>Khushi</i>)	Mysterious, solemn, librarian, clairvoyant. “Love interest” of a male character, mostly seen through Gopal’s (Ajay Devgan) eyes, passive.
<i>Housefull 4</i>	Kriti Sanon (<i>Kriti Thakral</i>), Kriti Kharbanda (<i>Neha Thakral</i>) Pooja Hegde (<i>Pooja Thakral</i>)	All 3 (“love interests” of male leads, emphasis on looks, passive).
<i>Total Dhamaal</i>	Madhuri Dixit Nene (<i>Bindu Patel</i>)	Disgruntled wife, constantly jeering at her husband, cajoles men to feel “sensitivity and sympathy”.
<i>Chhichhore</i>	Shradhha Kapoor (<i>Maya</i>)	College dream girl, “love interest” of a male lead, passive, not part of the “college fun”, a supplementary character to <i>Anni</i> (Sushant Singh Rajput).
<i>Ludo</i>	Sanya Malhotra (<i>Shruti Choksi</i>) Fatima Sana Shaikh (<i>Aarushi Mathur</i>) Pearle Maaney (<i>Sheeja Thomas</i>)	Objectified, sexualised, gold-digger, “love interest” of a male lead. Victim of husband’s cheating, helpless, needy, “love interest” of a male lead, self-centred. Few dialogues, aspirational, “love interest” of a male lead.
<i>Bhoot Police</i>	Yami Gautam (<i>Maya</i>) Jacqueline Fernandez (<i>Kanika</i>)	Tea estate manager, solemn, responsible, becomes possessed by a ghost, formidable. Vlogger, emphasis on her looks and physique, manipulative, ogled at by Vibhooti (Saif Ali Khan.)

Characterization that Stunts Female Comicality

Table 2 depicts that the following major persona traits attributed to the female actors in the scripting processes result in the stunting of their comic persona:

Romanticization: In almost all the films, female leads play the ‘heroine’ to one or the other male lead, this takes away the opportunity to display their individuality and uniqueness. Characters like Priya in *Fukrey*,

Ranjana in *Welcome Back*, Sona in *Saat Uchakkey*, and Aarushi Mathur in *Ludo* play women who are dependent on their respective male heroes to validate their presence. They are often seen through the eyes of the hero with songs eulogizing their beauty, making it difficult for them to step out of these stereotypical frames.

Scripting them in hackneyed ways goes on to show that no matter which genre women are cast in, they will continue to be depicted as male-dependent and glamorized. If 19 out of total 20 female characters lack a comic persona and 16 out of these 20 are being romanticized (see code “love interest” in Table 2), it shows that the major reason for casting women in ensemble comedies is projecting them as romantic interests of male characters. In *Ludo*, Sanya Malhotra is highly sexualized, with a long scene of partial nudity and moaning. Also, Shraddha Kapoor (Maya) in *Chhichhore* is projected as the ‘college dream girl’, admired for her beauty by the college boys and pursued romantically by many. Men flaunt their charm and joviality through easy flirtations with the women, often displayed through witty pick-up lines. The laughter emerges from the banter shared among the men.

Male gaze is further enhanced by songs which further the lover’s romantic feelings towards the beloved. These songs project male perspective of life and the women in them are portrayed as unidimensional. Some of the song lyrics are listed below:

Maine tujhko dekha (Golmaal Again)

Maine tujhko dekha
Teri ore dil phenka
Pari tu heaven ki
Kehna hai nazron ka

(Translation: *I looked at you and threw my heart at you/ My eyes speak that you are an angel of the Heavens*)

Khairiyat (Chhichhore)

Khairiyat pucho, kabhi to kaifiyat pucho
Tumhare bin deewane ka kya haal hai

(Translation: *Ask how I am, ask how my condition is/ Without you, what my state is!*)

Solemnness: Some of these female leads have been scripted as too solemn, uptight, and anti-humorist. This can be spotted in the codes emerging

from Maya in *Bhoot Police*, Ana Mathew in *Golmaal Again*, and Neetu Singh in *Fukrey*. These women lack individual pursuits and personality traits. Men go about frolicking, creating mischief, upending tables while the women act shocked, helpless, only intervening to stop the hullabaloo.

Conscience Reflectors of Men: Instead of displaying personal shortcomings or relatable imperfections, some of these women act as men’s ‘conscience reflectors’. They’re constantly shown bickering with men, reprimanding them for their nonchalance or mischief. Men’s foibles grant them opportunities to create humour. The viewer is tickled due to their feeling of superiority over these ‘erring men’. In *Fukrey*, Vishakha Singh reprimands Manjot Singh (as *Lali*) when he assumes that she is in love with him. In the same film, Richa Chadha thwarts Varun Sharma’s (as *Choocha*) romantic advances. Here, it is the male characters whose lack of true discernment tickles the viewer. Their imperfections, silliness and non-practicality are amusing. In *The Shaukeens*, Lisa Haydon is shown as a slow-witted character, completely ignorant of the lustful impulses of the three older men living under her roof. The male sexual desperation forms the basis of the film’s humour.

Seductress: In *Chhichhore*, Shraddha Kapoor ‘amuses by seducing’ a guy from the rival team over a phone call late into the night, deterring him from playing well the following day. Others like Aditi Sharma in *Saat Uchakkey* and Pooja Hegde in *Housefull 4* attract with their sexual appeal. In *Fukrey*, the song *Ambarsariya* (Dhiman, 2013) features two women with no comic persona in the film. The song presents the female perspective where she emphasizes her attractiveness, daintiness, and the intentions of men lurking around to come close to her. The women are portrayed as source of male pleasure, and their roles are supplementary to that of men.

Man’s Possession: These films are replete with dialogues and songs emphasizing a woman’s identity as man’s possession, his centrality lies in protecting her from danger, akin to a male saviour. In *Housefull 4*, three male leads in the song *Ek chumma* (*Anjaan*, 2019) are seen pleading to the leading ladies for a kiss in return for saving them from the clutches of goons.

Peacemakers: In 6 out of 10 films, we find slapstick comedy sequences but female characters are a no-show or display inconsequential participation in creating any humour. Here, humour is created through physical acts

of falling, throwing things at one another, through “mild comic violence” (Bromley, 2019). In *Golmaal Again*, the iconic slapstick sequence depicts Tabu and Parineeti Chopra as peacemakers. It begins with Ajay Devgan smacking three men, smashing glass jars, attempting to put Arshad Warsi’s hand into the grinder, women only intervene to calm down rage of men. One sees a liberal give-away of comic opportunities to the men as opposed to women. Similarly, *Chhichhore* begins with an entertaining slapstick sequence where two male leads trigger a water bucket fight in their hostel, and there is no trace of Shradha Kapoor in this sequence.

Sentimentality: In *Total Dhamaal*, Madhuri Dixit hardly has any funny verbal or non-verbal expressions, she nags, and is always the initiator of empathic gestures among the cast. The female characters merely exemplify kindness and hospitality, but nothing more than that, especially in comic films.

Discussion

In all the films undertaken for study, only one film, *Fukrey*, with just one female actor out of twenty women in the lead displays a comic persona (See Table 2). It is abundantly clear that there is lack of female comedic persona, that too when women’s inclusion in comedy films is already significantly less than men. Richa Chadha’s character in *Fukrey* amuses through wittiness and sarcasm. On her neck, she flaunts a tattoo: S-I-N-D-E-R-E-L-L-A, a rendition of the Disney character Cinderella only with ‘sin’ as prefix to emphasize her role as a gangster in the film. It clearly shows the scriptwriters Vipul Vig and Mrighdeep Singh Lamba’s attention to detail when writing her character for the film. Film reviewers too lay a testament to the comic strength of this portrayal. “Indeed, Richa’s character...was as comical as she was menacing for the rag-tag group of students who stumble into a financial quicksand” (Mathur, 2017). Moreover, the character’s presence is active and emphasis is laid on her personality. Rest of the 19 female leads in the films studied are passive, tied in one way or the other to the male leads, who have an active presence in the films. Men play “carefully scripted” comic characters with visible quirks and eccentricities, levitating the entertainment quotient of the film. In *Golmaal Again*, the entire male lead exhibits personalities with comic characteristics, creating humour through physical absurdities. It is to be noted that all the directors of this random sample of films are men. *Bhoot*

Police is the only exception, it includes a female writer (veteran film editor, writer Pooja Ladha Surti.) This beckons the question if women’s marginalization as comedy directors and writers translate into deficit as comedy actors too.

Conclusion

Women’s marginalization in the comedy genre is a matter of gross concern when we take into account their role as writers, actors, and directors. Regarding the ensemble comedy films released in 2012-21, the following can be concluded: 1 in 10 films has an equal male-female ratio; 1 in 10 films has a female comic persona; 1 female comic persona is found in 10 films; and male actors are more than females in the entire decade. Women’s comic opportunities are marred by over-emphasis on their ‘supporting traits’ of romanticization, sentimentality, solemnness, seductive and peacemaking qualities that emerge through their actions, dialogues and music in the films. Indeed, discriminatory patterns of film casting and scripting processes need to be discarded to support greater democratization and participation for both men and women at all levels of film making.

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Appendix: Table Referred for Calculation of Critical Value of $t (t_c)$ (Turney, 2022)

Critical values of t for two-tailed tests

Significance level (α)

Degrees of freedom (df)	.2	.15	.1	.05	.025	.01	.005	.001
1	3.078	4.165	6.314	12.706	25.452	63.657	127.321	636.619
2	1.886	2.282	2.920	4.303	6.205	9.925	14.089	31.599
3	1.638	1.924	2.353	3.182	4.177	5.841	7.453	12.924
4	1.533	1.778	2.132	2.776	3.495	4.604	5.598	8.610
5	1.476	1.699	2.015	2.571	3.163	4.032	4.773	6.869
6	1.440	1.650	1.943	2.447	2.969	3.707	4.317	5.959
7	1.415	1.617	1.895	2.365	2.841	3.499	4.029	5.408
8	1.397	1.592	1.860	2.306	2.752	3.355	3.833	5.041
9	1.383	1.574	1.833	2.262	2.685	3.250	3.690	4.781
10	1.372	1.559	1.812	2.228	2.634	3.169	3.581	4.587
11	1.363	1.548	1.796	2.201	2.593	3.106	3.497	4.437
12	1.356	1.538	1.782	2.179	2.560	3.055	3.428	4.318
13	1.350	1.530	1.771	2.160	2.533	3.012	3.372	4.221
14	1.345	1.523	1.761	2.145	2.510	2.977	3.326	4.140
15	1.341	1.517	1.753	2.131	2.490	2.947	3.286	4.073
16	1.337	1.512	1.746	2.120	2.473	2.921	3.252	4.015
17	1.333	1.508	1.740	2.110	2.458	2.898	3.222	3.965
18	1.330	1.504	1.734	2.101	2.445	2.878	3.197	3.922
19	1.328	1.500	1.729	2.093	2.433	2.861	3.174	3.883
20	1.325	1.497	1.725	2.086	2.423	2.845	3.153	3.850
21	1.323	1.494	1.721	2.080	2.414	2.831	3.135	3.819
22	1.321	1.492	1.717	2.074	2.405	2.819	3.119	3.792
23	1.319	1.489	1.714	2.069	2.398	2.807	3.104	3.768
24	1.318	1.487	1.711	2.064	2.391	2.797	3.091	3.745
25	1.316	1.485	1.708	2.060	2.385	2.787	3.078	3.725
26	1.315	1.483	1.706	2.056	2.379	2.779	3.067	3.707
27	1.314	1.482	1.703	2.052	2.373	2.771	3.057	3.690
28	1.313	1.480	1.701	2.048	2.368	2.763	3.047	3.674
29	1.311	1.479	1.699	2.045	2.364	2.756	3.038	3.659
30	1.310	1.477	1.697	2.042	2.360	2.750	3.030	3.646
40	1.303	1.468	1.684	2.021	2.329	2.704	2.971	3.551
50	1.299	1.462	1.676	2.009	2.311	2.678	2.937	3.496
60	1.296	1.458	1.671	2.000	2.299	2.660	2.915	3.460
70	1.294	1.456	1.667	1.994	2.291	2.648	2.899	3.435
80	1.292	1.453	1.664	1.990	2.284	2.639	2.887	3.416
100	1.290	1.451	1.660	1.984	2.276	2.626	2.871	3.390
1000	1.282	1.441	1.646	1.962	2.245	2.581	2.813	3.300
Infinite	1.282	1.440	1.645	1.960	2.241	2.576	2.807	3.291



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