



Through the Male Gaze and Beyond: Reading Basanti and Radha in Sholay (1975) as Precursors of Female Agency in Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

This paper analyses Basanti and Radha's characters in Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* (1975) and aims to further feminist film studies and film analyses in the context of the portrayal of women in popular Hindi cinema. Using Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, the paper compares scenes from *Sholay* to the portrayals of women in popular Hindi cinema and identifies the constraints of women's characters in a male-dominant storyline and the degree of agency those characters possess.

The paper notes that *Sholay*'s storyline remains fundamentally male-dominated, but Basanti and Radha's characters are highly active and, in many respects, emotionally empowered. This differentiates them from the majority of female characters in Hindi films of the 1970s. Basanti and Radha's characters thus demonstrate the beginnings of more active and emotionally complex character portrayals for women in Hindi films that become more prevalent in the subsequent decades. This paper is part of the larger dialogue regarding the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema and the implications those portrayals have from a cultural perspective.

Keywords: *Sholay*, Basanti, Radha, male gaze, feminist film theory, Hindi cinema, women's representation, Laura Mulvey, 1970s Bollywood.

Introduction

Sholay hit theaters on 15 August 1975. It is a film with a legacy. Directed by Ramesh Sippy and written by Salim and Javed, it is one of the most influential films in the history of Hindi cinema. It is the best Indian film of all time. This was cemented by the British Film Institute's Top 10 Indian Films, which placed it at number one, and the 50th Filmfare Awards, which called it the best film of the last fifty years. It ran in theatres for over five years. It is such a big deal that it split Indian film history into 'Sholay BC and Sholay AD' (Chopra, 2000)

It is a film with a legacy not only because of how it was shot or the story it told. It also has a legacy in feminist studies and Hindi cinema. Basanti (Hema Malini), the courageous and

outspoken horse-cart driver, was created alongside Radha (Jaya Bhaduri), the silent widow. They were created at the same time in 1975 as British film scholar Laura Mulvey, was releasing her essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), where she argued that women in mainstream film were portrayed as passive objects of the male gaze. When Mulvey's essay is used as a lens to analyze the two characters in 'Sholay,' it undoubtedly is able to showcase the very real limitations of the film, while also showcasing the progressive ideas that are imbedded in its narrative.

Objectives

This study will:

- (i) Examine the characterization of Basanti and Radha in Sholay through the lens of feminist film theory.
- (ii) Place these characters in the context of 1970s mainstream Hindi cinema and female representation.
- (iii) Analyze the extent to which these characters act as role models within the fictional world of the film and beyond, including their impact on later Hindi films.

Research Questions

This research study seeks to address following questions:

Q1: To what extent do Basanti and Radha conform to or challenge Mulvey's (1975) concept of the 'male gaze' concerning the Hindi cinema?

Q2: In what ways do the socio-political and patriarchal structures of 1970s India dictate the narrative functions of Basanti and Radha?

Q3: How do Basanti and Radha, in their particular filmic contexts, reflect and/or anticipate emerging conceptions of womanhood in Hindi cinema?

Review of Literature

The study of gender in Indian cinema has grown a lot since the 1990s. Rane and Chowdhary (2023) point out that pre-liberalization Bollywood films from the 1950s to the 1970s often showed a one-dimensional view of femininity. In these films, women existed mainly for the pleasure and gaze of the male audience (Rane & Chowdhary, 2023). Scholars exploring the link between feminist theory and Hindi cinema have mostly relied on Mulvey's (1975) idea that the camera in mainstream cinema focuses on women's bodies for erotic appeal, while men usually drive the action and control the story (The Conversation, 2025). Writing specifically about Sholay, Ziauddin Sardar argues in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* that one female character, Radha, exists only to suffer in silence, while another character, Basanti, is just a talkative village girl (as cited in Denkpause Films, 2021).

This interpretation, while influential, has faced criticism. Anupama Chopra's National Award-winning study, *Sholay: The Making of a Classic* (2000), places the film in its socio-political

context. She notes that its sympathetic take on widow remarriage was quite progressive for a popular film of that time.

Jha (2003) looks at *Sholay* as a buddy movie shaped by the tense politics of the Emergency era. The film tries to bring back this idea of India as a male-driven society, and you see women pushed to the background. But writers like Anna Vetticad (2014) and critics celebrating the film's 50th anniversary (Moviejawn, 2025) pick up on something different. They notice Radha's story hints at widow remarriage-pretty moving and honestly progressive for its time. Jai's courtship of Radha feels respectful, especially when compared to the more traditional romance between Veeru and Basanti. All of this shows there's a real tension in *Sholay*: it sticks to its patriarchal roots but still manages to slip in moments of genuine social critique.

Then there's Dwyer (2005), writing in the *Journal of Women's History*, who digs into women, stars, and how the Hindi public sphere saw them in the 1970s. Her work gives us a crucial bit of context for how female stars were received back then and what those roles meant to audiences at the time.

Theoretical Framework

Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory sits at the center of this framework. In her landmark essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she called out mainstream films for pushing patriarchal ideas. Hollywood, she argued, built its magic by manipulating visual pleasure-basically, turning desire and beauty into a language that carried the values of those in power (Buckland, 2025; The Conversation, 2025). Mulvey says women in these films play two roles: they're erotic objects both for the characters and for us, the viewers. She pulls together ideas from semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, and her essay ends up being one of the most quoted and taught pieces in Film Studies (Buckland, 2025).they're erotic objects both for the characters and for us, the viewers. She pulls together ideas from semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, and her essay ends up being one of the most quoted and taught pieces in Film Studies (Buckland, 2025).

This paper uses Mulvey's framework to look at *Sholay*, but it doesn't pretend the fit is perfect. Mulvey developed her theory around Hollywood films, and Indian cinema brings its own layers-caste, community, religion, and those uniquely Indian song-and-dance numbers-all of which complicate a direct application of Mulvey's ideas (Rajan, 2020). To give the analysis more depth, the paper turns to social role modelling, based on Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Looking at what Basanti and Radha teach female viewers adds another level-one that goes beyond just who looks at whom on screen.

Methodology

This research applies qualitative content analysis of the 1975 Hindi film *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975), examining scenes that focus on Basanti and Radha in their representations of gender, sexuality and power. The researcher has undertaken a close reading of four important scenes: (i) the horse-cart chase sequence; (ii) the 'Jab Tak Hai Jaan' forced-dance scene; (iii) the sequence of Jai and Radha's evening courtship by the harmonica; and (iv) the Thakur's proposal of widow remarriage for Radha. In this analysis, the researcher draws upon secondary sources from film criticism on

Sholay, feminist film criticism, and accounts of 1970s Hindi cinema that contextualise the film. The film's representations of gender and sexuality are analysed as a cultural text that reflects the confluence of production, narrative, and reception.

Content Analysis with Examples from the Film

Basanti: Vivacity, Voice, and the Limits of Agency

Portrayed as a horse-cart driver (tanga-wali) in a rural Indian village, Basanti is a vivacious yet fragile woman who is conventionally considered low-cast - yet economically self-sufficient (Denkpause Films, 2021). In an era dominated by male chivalry, she is a working woman in the most orthodox sub-society in Indian culture, the rural village. Like some of the other characters in the film, she represents qualities of vivacity, talk, and mobility that are markedly different from the decorative placeholders in commercial Hindi cinema.

Basanti has one scene which is most dramatic and is placed in the middle of the film. Gabbar Singh ties and injures Veeru and Basanti stands right at the center of the male gaze asking her to dance until she falls. According to Mulvey's (1975) analysis, Basanti is turned into an 'erotic object' and 'for the characters in the narrative', Basanti's body is objectified. Her continuous dance moves motivate the male gaze of Gabbar Singh, who treats Basanti as a play object that serves his murderous actions. However, Basanti shows her courage and agency by dancing even when she might collapse, saving Veeru's life. Basanti's defiance of the male gaze puts her on the pedestal of sacrifice and agency at the same time. As per Open The Magazine (2025), 'Basanti has one song on her own - Jab Tak Hai Jaan - when Gabbar says he won't kill Veeru as long as she dances.

The most iconic and notable chase scene is the horse-cart one. According to Denkpause Films, 'in a film that is full of stunning action sequences, it was Basanti's horse-cart chase that was the most thrilling and nerve-wracking' (Denkpause Films, 2021). This meant that the female protagonist was the lead in one of the film's most dynamic scenes, which was not a common occurrence in the 1970s Hindi action film.

However, Basanti's character's romantic storyline is not free of problems. Several critics argue that Veeru's attempt to win over Basanti is 'highly gender-normative' because it is filled with 'highly unwanted touching and bothering by Veeru and feel like 'when a woman says no she means yes or maybe' tones' (Aijaz, 2012; Moviejawn, 2025; Vetticad, 2014). The director acknowledged the negative aspects, albeit they were not uncommon in Hindi mainstream cinema of the time, they can be considered another manifestation of the male gaze on the female character.

Radha: Silence, Widowhood, and Submerged Desire

Radha is the Thakur's widowed daughter-in-law-a character type whose figure, on the surface, is encircled by loss and restriction. In the 1970s, such figures were being figured by star-vehicle films, yet Sholay is unique in that it seizes widow remarriage as the film's densely embedded subject. As described by the director in the aforementioned article from Vetticad (2014), Sholay

“goes as far as Sanjeev Kumar taking his widowed daughter-in-law to discuss marriage for her. It was touching upon several social issues very nicely.

The critical juncture of Radha’s evening courtship, in which Jai plays the harmonica every night against the wall visible through Radha’s window, is memorable for that which is not said: Radha never speaks; her ‘subtle longingness of love and affection... says a thousand words about a character that has lost the most integral part of an Indian bride’s life’ (Denkpause Films, 2021). Indeed, for some feminist critics, this silent, inaccessible sexuality is not the epitome of female beauty as a decorative object of the male gaze, but rather represents the culmination of that gaze- the woman’s subjectivity reduced to ornamentation. And yet, the scene might also be read as a culturally specific articulation of a widow’s desire in a social system where any open eroticism would be rendered insupportable.

Jaya Banhuri, according to Moviejawn (2025), “seriously presents Radha as a woman with desires and feelings that exist beyond her present widowhood,” suggesting that the woman character gained an inner complexity in the mind of the audience that was relatively progressive in the commercial Hindi cinema. In contrast, Sardar’s calm disapproval for Radha’s entrapment in “silent suffering” (cited in Denkpause Films, 2021) undermines her ‘inner’ complexity, even though this quality is marred by the film because Radha is left without a future again because of the death of Jai, and thus ‘twice widowed’ (Vetticad, 2014).

High on Films (2025) notes that “Though they are presented as symbols of love and virtue, they are not interchangeable symbols of love or virtue but distinct personalities who represent different forms of survival in a hostile world.” They together and “challenged the stereotype of the female lead as a decorative placeholder, allowing women to exist in the filmic moral universe as independent entities.”

Analysis and Results

The content analysis yields three principal findings:

Both characters are love interests defined for male protagonists, and the main moral and action stakes of the films are played by men. They are therefore imprisoned in a patriarchal discourse in tune with Mulvey's (1975) model: the film's visual imagery (shooting for instance of the singing scenes featuring Hema Malini) and screenplay (development of the love stories that endow male characters with more storylines) correspond to the male gaze.

At the same time, they undermine the passive-object role reserved by Mulvey. Both Basanti and Radha display characters traits corresponding to subjects within a narrative: Basanti's financial independence, her rebuffs to Veeru's preying on her, her choice of death and leading action chase, give her a sense of being an agent of the story. On the other hand, Radha's attraction and the film's approval of her desire to remarry attest her status of woman with an intimate life and social recognition that the film is willing - if nonetheless timidly - to accept.

Finally, the women’s characters empowered female viewers by showing a dimension of womanhood not commonly seen at this time in the Indian film industry- Basanti as financially

independent and bold been beneficial to the women of India in 1975. The film also pushed the boundaries of the Hindi film mainstream by discussing the issue of widow remarriage, as reported by Chopra (2000).

Limitations and Further Scope

Although this study has several limitations, it seeks to overcome the popular misreading of Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* (1975) by examining one of the film's most iconic and evocative images as an example of cinematic subversion. We acknowledge that our content analysis is qualitative and interpretive, meaning other readings of these frames are possible and legitimate. Our study relies on the primary assumption that *Sholay* performed a critique of hegemonic gender roles which was read by the Indian audience in 1975 as a complex representation of women as survivors.

Mulvey's (1975) theory which forms the basis of our analysis is concerned with the particular cultural and historical context of Hollywood cinema. However, her insights can be usefully applied to Hindi cinema, with its distinct conventions of the song-dance sequence and the social meanings of female stardom (Dwyer, 2005).

A comparative study of female characters in 1970s Hindi films would allow for a more nuanced understanding of *Sholay*'s place in this historical context. Furthermore, this study did not include any audience reception data, such as audience surveys or box office analysis, which would allow for claims about the film's impact to be further strengthened. Reception studies - including oral histories from female viewers who watched the film in 1975, for example - would greatly enhance this literature.

Conclusion

Sholay (1975) is not a feminist film. It was produced within and for a patriarchal popular cinema, and its narrative, camera language, and genre conventions largely serve male-centred storytelling. Basanti dances for the villain's gaze; Radha grieves for a dead husband and almost remarries at the behest of a male patriarch. These are real and significant limitations.

Yet to read *Sholay* only through its constraints is to miss the ways in which Basanti and Radha broke from the prevailing mould of female representation in 1970s Hindi cinema. Basanti is a financially independent, vocally assertive, physically courageous woman in rural India - a screen type that had few precedents in commercial Hindi cinema. Radha is a widow whose desire is taken seriously and whose right to a future is, however hesitantly, endorsed. Together, they 'opened a subtle but important door for more layered female characters in the commercial Hindi cinema that followed' (High on Films, 2025).

The prism of female role modelling reveals that what *Sholay* modelled for its vast audiences was not equality, but something more modest and perhaps more socially urgent in its context: the idea that women's survival, courage, desire, and autonomy are worthy of cinema's attention. In a film landscape dominated by either the idealised mother or the decorative beloved, that was, in 1975, no small thing.

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