

WOMEN IN INDIAN BIOPICS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REPRESENTATION SINCE 2010

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Abstract:

This article aimed to conduct a quantitative analysis of 65 biopic films made in India the last two decades (Source: IMDB / Google) to explore the gender representation in biopics. The analysis showed that the majority (65%) of biopics are male-centric, with the remaining 35% being female-centric. In both cases, male and female characters are confined to traditional gender roles and attributes, with male centric biopics emphasizing masculine attributes and women centric biopics focusing on traditional feminine traits. It was concluded that the gender-biased approach to storytelling in Indian biopics excludes female characters and stories in the genre and reinforces existing gender stereotypes. To be more inclusive, biopics in India need to move away from gender-biased storytelling and present a more equitable representation of genders (Das, Kumar, and Singh, 2020).

Keywords: Gender Representation, Indian Biopics, Male Biopics, Women Biopics, Gender Stereotypes, Gender-Biased Storytelling, Surge in Biopics.

Introduction & Review of Literature

A biopic, short for “biographical picture,” is a film that tells the story of a real person’s life. Biopics can be based on the life of a single individual, a group of individuals, or even a historical event. They often focus on the key events and milestones in the subject’s life, showcasing their achievements and struggles. The genre of biopics has been popular in the film industry for many years, providing a platform for film makers to share inspiring stories of famous individuals and their impact on the world. Biopics can encompass a wide range of subjects, including artists, musicians, political leaders, athletes, and more (Faber and McCarthy, 2019). The goal of a biopic is to offer a glimpse into the life of the subject, allowing audiences to gain a deeper understanding of their story and legacy.

The issue of gender inequality has been a persistent problem in India, as is evidenced by the prevalence of gender imbalances in various spheres, including socio-economic, political, and cultural domains. As such, this study attempts to examine the representation of gender dynamics and inequality in Indian biopics since 2010. Specifically, this research seeks to explore how gender is portrayed in Indian biopics in terms of character development, story arcs and themes, and the ways in which these representations either challenge or perpetuate gender inequality. To that end, this article will examine the portrayals of key characters in biopics released since 2010, focusing particularly on the ways in which female characters are portrayed and the potential implications of these representations for gender equality. Additionally, this research will also explore audience reception to such portrayals and discuss potential strategies for addressing gender imbalances in biopics. In this way, this paper seeks to contribute to the literature on gender inequality in India, as well as provide valuable insights into the ways in which gender dynamics play out in Indian biopics (Katti et al., 2018).

Biopics in India

Narasimhan et al. (2019), Biopics have become a popular form of biographical storytelling that explore the lives of distinguished personalities and their impact on the world. With India being a melting pot of culture, customs, and religions, it is no surprise that the country has produced some of the most captivating biopics in recent years. These biopics create an emotional connection with

viewers and provide an insight into the life and times of people who played a pivotal role in India's history. In recent years, some of the most well-known biopics in India have been based on the lives of famous personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, and J.R.D. Tata. These biopics portray the struggles and triumphs of these people, and the transformation they brought to the country. The biopics also provide a valuable insight into India's socio-economic, religious, and political landscape during their time. The biopics also emphasize the importance of inspiration, determination, and resilience of these personalities in overcoming the social and political challenges of their era. Beside the famed personalities, biopics have also focused on the untold stories of lesser-known individuals such as KalpanaChawla, Paan Singh Tomar and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who made invaluable contributions to the nation with their courage, wit, and determination. Biopics have become an effective medium of entertainment and knowledge, allowing viewers to take an intimate look into the lives of well-known and influential personalities who shaped the destiny of India. Through these biopics, viewers not only gain an understanding of the times in which these personalities lived and worked, but also gain an appreciation for their extraordinary efforts, and a better understanding of the Indian culture and ethos. At the same time, biopics also make it possible for younger generations to connect with the history of their country, which helps foster a sense of patriotism. In summary, biopics are an important form of biographical storytelling that allow the audience to connect with the real people behind the stories and appreciate their contribution in shaping the destiny of India. These biopics serve as an important source of inspiration and education, and are a great way to foster patriotism among the youth.

Methodology:

This paper seeks to assess the depiction of gender inequality in Indian biopics, specifically in relation to the portrayal of male and female lead characters. The study seeks to identify the factors contributing to this imbalance, with a focus on biopics released since 2010. Data is collected from both qualitative and quantitative sources, and is organized for analysis. A qualitative content analysis is conducted on biopics released during the study period to identify patterns and factors responsible for gender inequality in character representation.

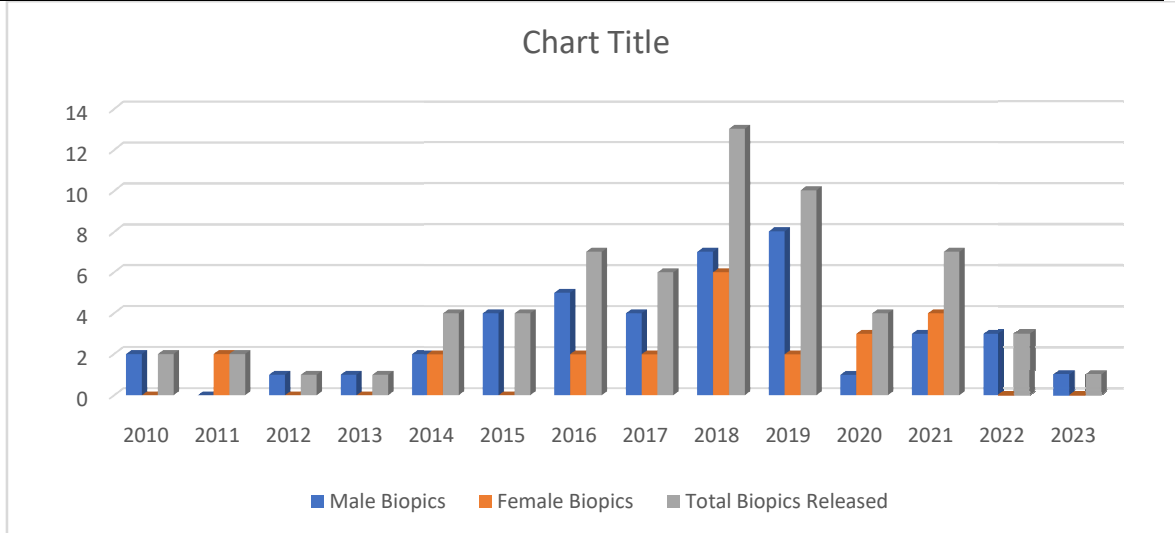
Findings:

Number of Biopics Released Men Vs Women since 2010:

In India since 2010 a total of 65 biopics were released including the male centric and women centric biopics in all languages. Out of which 42 films were male-centric and 22 films were women-centric biopics.

The following table lists the number of biopics made on women and men since 2010.

S. No	Year	Male Biopics	Female Biopics	Total
01.	2010	02	00	02
02.	2011	00	02	02
03.	2012	01	00	01
04.	2013	01	00	01
05.	2014	02	02	04
06.	2015	04	00	04
07.	2016	05	02	07
08.	2017	04	02	06
09.	2018	07	06	13
10.	2019	08	02	10
11.	2020	01	03	04
12.	2021	03	04	07
13.	2022	03	00	03
14.	2023	01	00	01
		42	23	65



Bar graph representing the overall biopics released in India since 2010 gender wise.

Source: IMDB / Google.com

- It is evident from the above graph that the total number of women biopics released is half of the number of male biopics.
- Out of the 65 biopics released during the period 2010 – 2023, the male biopics were 64% and the remaining 36% only were centered around women. This proved that this period has witnessed the domination of male-centric biopics when compared to women-centric biopics in India.
- During the covid pandemic period (2020 -21) more biopics on women like Gunjan Saxena (2020), Shakuntala Devi (2020), Rashmi Rocket (2021) was released in India in the Over-The – Top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Zee5 and Disney Hotstar.
- In the year 2018, a majority of six women centric biopic films have been released like Mahanati (Telugu), Aami (Malayalam), Karanjeet Kaur (Hindi) etc and got commercially successful and critically acclaimed paving the path for more women-centric biopics to be released in the future.

Content of the biopics:

Since 2010, there has been a significant increase in the production of biopics in India, both about male and female personalities. These films typically depict the life and achievements of notable individuals, including politicians, sports stars, and cultural icons. However, despite the similarities in the basic premise of these films, there are some distinct differences in the content of men and women centered biopics.

- Male-centric biopics tend to focus primarily on the subject's achievements and successes, emphasizing the challenges and the obstacles that were overcome. These films often depict the subjects as strong, determined individuals who have worked hard to achieve their goals. For example, "Bhaag Milkha Bhaag" (2013) depicts the life of Indian sprinter Milkha Singh, while "M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story" (2016) explores the life of Indian cricketer M.S. Dhoni.
- Women-centric biopics, on the other hand, tend to focus more on the personal struggles and obstacles faced by the protagonist, particularly in relation to societal expectations and gender discrimination. They often explore themes such as motherhood, family, and relationships, and may have a more introspective and emotional tone. These biopics may also highlight the protagonist's contributions to society, particularly in areas such as education, healthcare, and social welfare. For example, "Mary Kom" (2014) is a film about Indian boxer Mary Kom, who overcame numerous obstacles to achieve success in a male-dominated sport, while "Thalaivi" (2021) depicts the life of the former Indian actor and politician Dr. J. Jayalalithaa, her expedition into becoming a successful and powerful politician from a renowned artist.

The difference in content reflects broader cultural attitudes about gender and success, as well as the ways in which men and women experiences are valued and represented in the popular culture. It also suggests that women biopics are seen as an opportunity to challenge these attitudes and provide a platform for the stories of women who have made important contributions to the society.

Themes and Characters

The primary difference between male centric and women centric biopics in India is in terms of the themes and characters. Male centric biopics tend to focus on a single male character and his struggles, typically relating to his rise to fame and/or his political aspirations. Male centric biopics often portray characters as being driven, determined, and commanding respect from those around them. For example, the biopic of former Indian president, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam (IamKalam – 2011), featured an enduring, powerful character whose story is largely focused on his scientific achievements and political aspirations.

In contrast, women centric biopics tend to focus on the struggles of multiple female characters and their efforts to achieve success in a male-dominated environment. Women centric biopics often tackle topics such as sexism, discrimination, and gender roles. For example, the biopic of Gunjan Saxena – The Kargil Girl (2020) is a women centric biopic that focusses on the struggles of the first Indian female Air Force Officer to enter a war zone. It also portrayed the challenges that Gunjan Saxena faced as a woman in a male – dominated field, and her efforts to break through the barriers of gender and social norms to achieve her goals. The gender prejudice that prevailed at that particular point of time is well featured in the movie.

Plot

Another significant difference between male and women centric biopics in India is in terms of plotlines. Male centric biopics tend to be focused on the hero's journey and often have a linear plot structure with a clear plotline. The plotlines are often more traditional and utilize tropes such as the rise and fall of a hero. For example, the biopic 'Manji – The Mountain Man' (2015) follows the story of Dashrath Manjhi as he sets out to carve a path through a mountain in order to provide a better life for his village.

In contrast, women centric biopics often have more complex and non-linear plotlines. Women centric biopics often explore themes such as the power of female solidarity and the effect of the patriarchy on women's lives. Women centric biopics often have a more nuanced approach to storytelling and focus on showcasing various women perspectives and experiences. For example, the biopic *Mahanati* (2018), follows the journey of a young girl as she struggles to achieve her dream of becoming a film actress in a male-dominated industry as well as her personal struggles and eventual downfall. The film spans several decades from the 1940s to the 1980s, and covers the highlights of Savitri's life and career, including her marriage with Gemini Ganesan and her struggle with illness and financial hardship.

Critical Reception

The critical reception of male and women centric biopics in India has been largely positive, with both men and women centric biopics receiving praise from critics. However, there have been nuanced differences in the way that male and women centric biopics have been received by critics. Male centric biopics have tended to focus more on the individual's story, with critics praising the film's ability to accurately portray the story of the subject. In contrast, women centric biopics have tended to focus more on the collective struggles of multiple women, with critics praising the films' ability to capture both the individual and collective struggles of women.

Conclusion

The main problem with the gender disparity in Indian biopics is that it continues an existing gender stereotype and does not give women the representation they deserve in the film industry. This is especially true for biopics which feature the lives of prominent political leaders and other public figures. It is important for Indian filmmakers and producers to recognize that women are equally capable of leading and achieving success, and they should be given the same attention and respect as their male counterparts.

Indian biopics have been skewed towards men since 2010. Although there have been some women-centric movies, the number of male-centric biopics far outweighs them. This gender disparity is a major cause for concern because it tends to encourage an existing gender bias and overlooks the struggles that women have faced and continue to face in this society. To ensure that women are more fairly represented in Indian biopics, it is important that filmmakers recognize the importance of providing equal attention to the successes and struggles of both men and women gender.

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