

Framing Resistance: Women's Agency and Identity in the Cinema of Shyam Benegal

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Abstract

Shyam Benegal, a pioneer of India's parallel cinema movement, crafted films that foreground women's struggles, identities, and resistance within a deeply patriarchal society. His cinematic narratives challenge mainstream depictions of women by focusing on their agency and inner lives. This paper explores Benegal's treatment of female characters in selected films, including *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Bhumika* (1977), *Mandi* (1983), and *Zubeidaa* (2001). These works not only deconstruct gender roles but also emphasize the intersection of class, caste, and tradition in shaping women's experiences. His cinema interrogates how cultural narratives shape the status of women and how women negotiate their place within traditional institutions.

Through a theoretical lens grounded in feminist film theory and postcolonial discourse, the study engages with Benegal's cinematic language to analyze the visual and narrative strategies he employs to articulate female subjectivity. The female characters in his films serve as sites of resistance—both overt and subtle—against institutional and interpersonal structures of domination. The study also contextualizes these portrayals within the broader history of Indian cinema, where stereotypical representations have long prevailed.

Furthermore, this research draws on critical film studies to demonstrate how Benegal's cinema functions as a cultural space for subaltern female voices. Through realist techniques and the consistent collaboration with socially conscious actors, his work carves a niche within feminist discourse in Indian cinema. Ultimately, this paper asserts that Benegal's films present a powerful counter-narrative to traditional Indian cinematic practices and contribute significantly to the feminist re-imagination of Indian womanhood.

Keywords: Shyam Benegal, Indian cinema, feminist film theory, agency, identity, representation

Introduction

Shyam Benegal, one of the foremost auteurs of Indian parallel cinema, has made significant contributions to gender discourse in Indian films. His work represents a radical departure from the stereotypical portrayal of women in mainstream Bollywood cinema, instead presenting female characters with psychological depth, autonomy, and complex motivations (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). Indian cinema, since its inception, has reflected and often reinforced prevailing social hierarchies and gender ideologies. In mainstream Bollywood, women have

frequently been portrayed as idealized figures—either as the self-sacrificing mother, the dutiful wife, or the romantic object of male desire (Gokulsing& Dissanayake, 2004). These tropes, while popular, tend to marginalize women’s subjectivity, reducing them to passive roles within patriarchal narratives. However, the rise of parallel cinema in the 1970s created a distinct space for filmmakers to engage with more realistic and socially grounded representations of Indian society, including the lives and struggles of women (Viridi, 2003).

Among the vanguard of this movement was Shyam Benegal, whose films offered nuanced and critical portrayals of Indian women. Unlike the decorative and often voiceless women in commercial cinema, Benegal’s female protagonists are complex, autonomous, and situated within specific socio-political contexts. Films like *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Bhumika* (1977), *Mandi* (1983), and *Zubeidaa* (2001) center women’s experiences, presenting them as agents of change, resistance, and introspection (Rajadhyaksha&Willemen, 1999).

Benegal’s work stands apart not just for its content but also for its cinematic form. His realistic aesthetic, regional settings, and use of non-linear narratives contribute to a filmic language that resists the glamorization typical of Bollywood. Furthermore, his consistent collaboration with actresses like Shabana Azmi and Smita Patil allowed for the creation of performances deeply rooted in emotional and intellectual complexity (Chatterji, 1998). These representations offer a counter-narrative to dominant cinematic conventions, aligning more closely with the concerns of feminist film theory, which critiques the male gaze and argues for a more active role for women in cinematic storytelling (Mulvey, 1975).

This paper aims to explore how Benegal’s cinema frames female resistance and agency through his portrayal of women negotiating identity within oppressive social structures. It adopts a theoretical framework that synthesizes feminist and postcolonial film theory to critically assess his work in both visual and narrative terms. In doing so, it contributes to broader discourses on gender, representation, and authorship in Indian cinema.

This paper critically examines how Benegal's cinema articulates female agency and identity, particularly through a selection of films that foreground women's lived experiences, challenges, and forms of resistance within the constraints of patriarchal Indian society.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework grounded primarily in **feminist film theory** and **postcolonial theory** to examine the representations of women's agency and identity in the cinema of Shyam Benegal. These perspectives allow for a critical exploration of how gendered identities are constructed, resisted, and reimaged in Indian socio-cultural and cinematic contexts.

1. Laura Mulvey (1975): The Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* introduced the concept of the **male gaze**, a form of spectatorship in which women are positioned as passive subjects for the pleasure of the male viewer. Mulvey argued that mainstream cinema tends to objectify women, reducing them to visual spectacles rather than autonomous characters with agency. Shyam Benegal's films offer a clear divergence from this model. His female protagonists often resist passive roles and instead emerge as narrators of their own stories, as seen in *Bhumika* where Usha recounts her life on her own terms. By disrupting the male gaze, Benegal aligns with feminist cinematic practices that allow women to "look back" and assert subjectivity.

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988): Subalternity and Silencing

In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak interrogates the historical and structural silencing of marginalized voices, particularly that of the subaltern woman, in colonial and postcolonial discourses. Spivak's argument is especially relevant in analyzing Benegal's portrayals of lower-caste and rural women. In *Ankur*, for instance, the Dalit woman Lakshmi becomes a symbol of layered subalternity—oppressed by both caste and gender—but Benegal provides her narrative space and cinematic agency. Her resistance is not through overt revolution, but through subtle assertion of dignity and emotional complexity, echoing Spivak's call to "rethink voice" rather than simply "give voice."

3. Shohini Ghosh and Shoma Chatterji (1998): Women in Indian Parallel Cinema

In her book *Subject Cinema, Object Woman*, Shoma Chatterji analyzes how Indian cinema constructs gender identities and the historical shift in portrayal due to the parallel cinema movement. She emphasizes that directors like Benegal broke away from the commodified, ornamental portrayal of women prevalent in Bollywood. Chatterji notes how these films allowed women to exist as full-fledged characters with moral dilemmas, aspirations, and contradictions. Benegal's work embodies this shift by presenting female leads who are not only central to the narrative but are also agents of moral and social inquiry.

4. Jyotika Viridi (2003): Women and Nationalism in Indian Cinema

In *The Cinematic ImagiNation*, Jyotika Viridi explores how Indian films contribute to national identity while reinforcing or challenging gender roles. She argues that cinema is a powerful tool for the ideological construction of womanhood in the nation-state. Benegal's *Zubeidaa* and *Mandi* offer compelling case studies here. In both films, female protagonists grapple with national and familial expectations, negotiating personal freedom within the confines of institutionalized patriarchy. Benegal complicates the binary of tradition and modernity, showing how women embody and resist nationalist ideologies simultaneously.

5. Geeta Kapur (1993): Media, Modernity, and Female Eroticism

Geeta Kapur critiques the eroticization and commodification of women in popular Indian media, especially post-liberalization. In *Erotic Innocence and the Culture of Youth*, she explores how women are reduced to visual pleasure in a market-driven cinematic culture. Benegal's rejection of this aesthetic—through his realist storytelling, focus on earthy female characters, and resistance to glamor—makes his films a site of visual counter-narrative. His women are rarely sexualized for male fantasy; instead, they are emotionally layered and situated in sociopolitical realities.

Together, these theoretical contributions provide a rich analytical lens through which to assess Benegal's filmography. **Feminist film theory** highlights the ways in which Benegal resists the visual grammar of patriarchal cinema. **Postcolonial theory** enables a reading of how marginalized women—across caste, class, and religion—are given complex voices and social relevance. This hybrid framework supports a nuanced examination of how Benegal constructs **women's resistance not merely as rebellion**, but as negotiation, endurance, and ultimately, self-realization.

Shyam Benegal and Parallel Cinema

Benegal emerged in the 1970s as a key figure in the Indian New Wave, known for his realist narratives and socially engaged storytelling (Rajadhyaksha&Willemen, 1999). Unlike mainstream cinema, which often relegated women to ornamental or sacrificial roles, Benegal offered narratives where women occupied central spaces. His female protagonists were not just acted upon but were agents of their own destinies, reflecting both the oppression they endured and their resistance against it.

1. ***Ankur* (1974)**: Awakening the Voice of the Subaltern Woman *Ankur* marks Benegal's debut and exemplifies his commitment to exploring marginalized voices. The film tells the story of Lakshmi, a Dalit woman caught in a web of exploitation and desire. While initially portrayed as a victim, Lakshmi emerges as a figure of resistance against caste and gender oppression. Her refusal to abort her child and her symbolic act of throwing a stone at her oppressor mark her assertion of agency (Chaudhuri, 2000). Benegal subverts the typical victim narrative by empowering Lakshmi with moral and emotional strength.
2. ***Nishant* (1975)**: The Politics of Patriarchy and Silence In *Nishant*, the abduction and sexual exploitation of Sushila, a schoolteacher's wife, by feudal landlords underscores the brutality of patriarchal control. The film portrays the complicity of social institutions and the helplessness of men, including Sushila's husband, in confronting power structures. Sushila's silence and suffering are juxtaposed with the collective violence that follows, suggesting that systemic change requires more than individual resistance (Mazumdar, 2007). Benegal critiques the normalization of violence against women and the failure of justice in patriarchal setups.

3. ***Bhumika* (1977):** The Fragmented Self and Feminine Desire *Bhumika*, based on the life of Marathi actress Hansa Wadkar, is a landmark feminist text in Indian cinema. The protagonist Usha explores multiple relationships in search of love and autonomy but repeatedly finds herself trapped in patriarchal expectations. The film's non-linear narrative reflects Usha's fragmented self and her inner turmoil (Kaplan, 1983). Her eventual decision to live alone, despite societal disapproval, is a radical act of self-definition. Benegal portrays Usha not as a victim but as a woman who reclaims her narrative.
4. ***Mandi* (1983):** Resistance from the Margins *Mandi* is a satirical portrayal of a brothel threatened by political and moral hypocrisy. Through the character of Rukmini Bai, Benegal presents a woman who navigates power structures with resilience and wit. The film critiques the exploitation of women under the guise of respectability and development. By humanizing sex workers and presenting them as a cohesive, supportive community, Benegal dismantles dominant moral paradigms (Parthasarathy, 1994). Rukmini Bai's leadership and strategic acumen highlight the potential for agency even in marginal spaces.
5. ***Zubeidaa* (2001):** Negotiating Modernity and Tradition *Zubeidaa* explores the life of a woman torn between tradition and self-fulfillment. Based on a true story, the film follows Zubeidaa's journey from a stifling marriage to a royal love affair, only to find herself once again confined by patriarchal norms. Her pursuit of a meaningful existence and her desire to act in films symbolize her resistance to societal expectations (Chakravarty, 2011). Benegal uses Zubeidaa's narrative to explore how women's identities are often shaped and constrained by familial and cultural structures.

Themes in Benegal's Depiction of Women:

- **Agency and Resistance:** His women characters often push back against patriarchal norms. Their resistance may be overt or subtle, but it is consistently portrayed as a conscious assertion of agency. For instance, in *Ankur*, Lakshmi (Shabana Azmi), a Dalit woman, challenges both feudal oppression and sexual exploitation by choosing to keep her dignity intact even in the face of betrayal by Surya, her upper-caste lover. Her quiet resilience culminates in the final act where a young boy retaliates, symbolizing her suppressed rebellion taking seed.
- **Intersectionality:** Benegal's films address not just gender, but how it intersects with caste, class, occupation, and tradition, rendering women's struggles more complex and contextual. As in the movie *Zubeidaa*, a Muslim woman and a film actress entering a Rajput royal household, Zubeidaa embodies the collision of modern and traditional identities. Her class and religious background render her an outsider, never fully accepted in the royal family.

- **Realism:** Benegal is known for his naturalistic style. He avoids melodrama, instead drawing attention to the everyday emotional and social struggles women face. For instance, the movie *Mandi* doesn't caricature its characters. Each woman has a distinct voice and backstory, and the community of sex workers is portrayed with empathy and detail, avoiding moral judgment.

Discussion

Across Benegal's films, resistance takes many forms: **silence, survival, escape, nonconformity, storytelling, and solidarity**. It is never simplistic or romanticized. Women resist not only individuals but entire systems—patriarchy, casteism, capitalism, and state power. Their identities are shaped by these struggles, making their agency multi-layered and deeply political. He consistently engages with themes of gender, power, and resistance. His female characters are not monolithic; they represent a spectrum of experiences shaped by caste, class, and geography. Whether it is Lakshmi's defiance in *Ankur*, Usha's existential quest in *Bhumika*, or Rukmini Bai's strategic resistance in *Mandi*, Benegal's women challenge normative definitions of femininity. His realist aesthetic and commitment to narrative complexity ensure that these portrayals resonate with authenticity and socio-political urgency.

Benegal's collaboration with strong female actors like Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, and Karisma Kapoor also contributed to the depth of his female characters. These performances brought nuance to the narratives and highlighted the emotional and intellectual labor of women in patriarchal settings.

Furthermore, Benegal employs **cinematic realism** to ground these portrayals. He avoids melodrama, relies on subtle performances, and foregrounds social contexts. His casting of actresses like Smita Patil and Shabana Azmi—who themselves were politically engaged—adds layers of authenticity. Their performances are not just artistic but ideological.

Conclusion

Shyam Benegal's cinema reimagines the position of women in Indian society and challenges dominant cinematic tropes by giving voice to characters often rendered invisible. His female protagonists embody a range of experiences—from rural oppression to urban self-realization—each of which articulates resistance in distinct ways. By fusing realist cinema with feminist and postcolonial concerns, Benegal opens a space for complex female subjectivity within Indian cinema.

Benegal's narratives do not offer simple resolutions; instead, they reflect the ongoing negotiations of women within structures of caste, patriarchy, and tradition. His films elevate female characters as both products and challengers of their environments. This approach shifts the discourse from victimhood to empowerment, situating women as central to the fabric of social change. Through meticulous attention to character, culture, and context, Benegal's cinema

becomes a powerful site for feminist engagement and a vital archive of gendered resistance in Indian film history.

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