

Representation of Minority Women in Contemporary Indian Bengali Cinema

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Abstract: *This study argues that Indian Bengali cinema prominently reinforces patriarchal and stereotypical images of minority women — especially Muslim, Dalit, Christian, etc. — by marginalizing or symbolically erasing them within stories. It uncovers a consistent trend, shared with Bollywood and other global industries, where minority women are mainly cast in underrepresented or stereotypical supporting roles. Unlike other regional cinemas, which have attracted attention, portrayals of minority women in Indian Bengali cinema have largely been disregarded. To address this gap, this research systematically investigates such representations using feminist theory, focusing on narrative analysis, to reveal how gender biases and socio-cultural factors shape these films. Through an in-depth analysis of selected films from 2015 to 2020, the study foregrounds the ongoing symbolic erasure of minority women by critically examining how gendered depictions persist. Taking two films as case studies — Srijit Mukherjee's *Rajkahini* (2015) and Birsa Dasgupta's *Crisscross* (2018) — the article scrutinizes the narrative roles assigned to minority women and their interactions with prevailing cultural ideologies.*

Keywords: Representation, Minority Women, Dalit, Bengali Cinema, Male Gaze, Film Studies

INTRODUCTION

The representation of minority women in Indian cinema is a crucial site through which broader socio-political dynamics are created and reiterated in the film. Despite extensive research on gender and film, a persistent gap remains regarding the specific mechanisms particularly the male gaze that shape the depiction of Muslim, Dalit, and other minority women on screen. These portrayals are often oversimplified, reinforcing patriarchal and stereotypical narratives that depict minority women as impoverished, oppressed, or inherently vulnerable to violence. These patterns are intensified by the racial and caste inequalities that pervade Bollywood and regional film industries (Simon & Hasan, 2025). This study applies the framework of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) to analyze how minority women are represented in Indian Bengali cinema, aiming to foreground how these portrayals influence and restrict storytelling opportunities for these groups (Rane & Chowdhary, 2023). The analysis highlights the intersection of gender, caste, and religion, recognizing cinema as both a mirror and a reproducer of dominant social attitudes. In this study, we use the broad definition of “minority” by Ahmad and Siddiqui (2017), comprising all those communities that lack socio-political power, to include not only religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians but also Dalits and Adivasi. Marginalized communities, including those in India and worldwide, have often been excluded from social, political, and economic privileges, a pattern that is reflected in their cinematic portrayals (Datta, 2000).

Cinema functions as a vital medium through which the experiences and identities of minority communities are shaped and expressed. The depiction of various cultural groups, lifestyles, and perspectives in films not only reflects but also actively influences societal attitudes and intergroup relationships (Sharma & Bitoria, 2025). By linking Western contexts (Wright, 2010; Ayuningtyas & Merdeka, 2021; Omi, 2022) to the marginalization depicted in Indian cinema, this analysis emphasizes the global consequences of media representation and how it reinforces or challenges dominant societal narratives. Connecting Western contexts with the Indian Bengali cinematic tradition reveals a transnational pattern of marginalizing minority groups in the film industry (Klinger, 2012). This study systematically examines the historical and contemporary depictions of minority women, particularly Dalit, Muslim, and Christian women, in Indian Bengali cinema. Taking selected films between 2015 and 2020 as case studies, this article offers a clear framework for

evaluating the role of film in both reinforcing and contesting prevailing sociopolitical discourses.

LITERATURE REVIEW: MINORITY WOMEN AND CINEMA

Minority women have long been marginalized in Indian cinema, with their perspectives frequently overlooked and their roles confined to stereotypes. Dalit and Muslim women are depicted in ways that reinforce entrenched caste and religious hierarchies: Dalit women are often portrayed as submissive and passive, while Muslim women are shown in binary roles such as the veiled woman or courtesan (Kamble & Biswal, 2023; Lalitha & Pankaj, 2022; Atwal, 2018). These representations sustain the dominant social order and limit the complexity of characters. Scholars, including Kamble and Biswal (2023) and Hussein and Hussain (2015), highlight how caste and gender discrimination intersect to perpetuate this marginalization and reinforce layered oppression, as exemplified in films such as *Ankur* (1974).

The concept of subalternity has gained significant importance in analytical discussions about minority women in cinema. In this context, the subaltern is characterized by historical neglect and voicelessness, a condition particularly pronounced for women (Spivak, 1988, 2000, 2010). Films like *Bavandar* (2000) and *Bandit Queen* (1994), both of which highlight the struggle for justice by those from lower-caste backgrounds, offer a nuanced exploration of issues and their impact on public discourse surrounding caste and gender (Mamta, 2017). Applying Laura Mulvey's (1989) feminist film theory shows how the masculine gaze influences the portrayal of Muslim women, casting them within a broader critique of patriarchal control over the cinematic representation. This gaze, rooted in male voyeurism and influenced by cultural norms, remains a significant aspect of patriarchal power in the film.

Intersectionality offers a framework for understanding how caste, gender, and sexuality intersect to deepen minority women's oppression in Indian cinema. Dalit feminist theory emphasizes that gender and caste lead to distinct forms of discrimination, as shown in *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), which contrasts Dalit and upper-caste women while critiquing heteronormativity and promoting non-conforming identities (Singh, 2022; Bose & Singh, 2022; Prasitha & Bhuvaneswari, 2024). The on-screen journeys of Dalit and Muslim women highlight the real-world effects of intersectionality (Tokatli, 2022; Hivale, 2023). Recent films, including *Karnan* (2021), *Jai Bhim* (2021), and *Article 15* (2019), increasingly portray Dalit women as active agents pursuing justice, signaling a shift in Indian cinema (Hivale, 2023; Basu & Tripathi, 2023). This change reflects shifting social attitudes and growing awareness of diverse stories, supporting the argument that Indian cinema is progressing in highlighting the authentic and complex identities of minority women (Agarwal, 2014; Datta, 2000; Zafar & Batta, 2017). Muslim women are often stereotyped in cinema, depicted as a uniform group with their individual complexities overlooked (Hussain et. al., 2023; Hussein & Hussain, 2015). Bollywood's portrayal of Muslim women is also evolving; for example, *Gully Boy* (2019) employs cinematography to provide a more nuanced view (Hussain & Hussain, 2015).

Regional cinema offers diverse perspectives on minority women; some films challenge stereotypes, while others reinforce patriarchal norms. Telugu and Malayalam films, such as *Narappa* (2021), *Love Story* (2021), and *Neelakanyil* (1954), either empower or restrict the representation of Dalit women (Nadamala & Tripathi, 2024; Mithuna, 2023). Bengali cinema has explored the evolving roles of women, often challenging patriarchal norms, particularly in the films of Satyajit Ray and Rituparno Ghosh. Their work portrays women as complex individuals navigating societal expectations. Although less studied, depicting minority women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is crucial for understanding the broader Bengali culture. Ray's films — *Mahanagar* (1963), *Devi* (1960), and *Ghare-Baire* (1984) — illustrate women shifting from submissive to assertive roles (Guha, 2024). Chaudhuri (2013) observes that *Charulata* explores the protagonist's artistic and feminine identity, reflecting a nuanced understanding of social dynamics. Ray and Ghosh exemplify postcolonial hybridity by balancing indigenous and colonial narratives to enrich discussions of identity and agency (Mukherjee, 2022). Filmmakers such as Aparna Sen and Kaushik Ganguly, who address gender and class disparities and showcase an auteur vision alongside a drive to transform the production landscape, have demonstrated a strong commitment to better representation. Films such as Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* (2003), which contrast domestic roles with socio-political themes such as colonization, reflect Tagore's influence (Chaudhuri, 2013). Recent Bengali films have increasingly explored women's roles, often portraying them as rebels against tradition and demonstrating a cinematic shift towards empowerment (Mukherjee, 2016). However, there is still a lack of academic scholarships on the portrayal of minority women in Bengali films.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs narrative analysis to examine the depiction of minority women in Indian Bengali films. Both visual and storytelling elements were systematically analyzed to understand the aims, structure, and content of these films. Out of approximately 375 films released between January 2015 and December 2020, only twenty films featured minority Muslim, Dalit and other minority women in lead or significant supporting roles, including Soubhik Kundu's *Kader Kuler Bou* (2015), Anindya Chatterjee's *Jhumura* (2015), Srijit Mukherjee's *Rajkahini* (2015) and *Zulfikar* (2016), Raja Sen's *Maya Mridanga* (2016), Aniket Chatopadhyay's *Kabir* (2018), and Birsa Dasgupta's *Criscross* (2018), among others. This sample underscores the ongoing exclusion of minority women from major cinematic narrative. This article focuses on Srijit Mukherjee's *Rajkahini* (2015) and Birsa Dasgupta's *Criscross* (2018) as case studies. These two films were chosen for analysis because they represent women from two minority communities each in main and supporting characters — *Rajkahini* has Muslim and Dalit female protagonists, while *Criscross* has Muslim and Christian women protagonists. Each film was analyzed using a three-step process. First, visual representations and symbolic meanings were identified and categorized. Second, the narrative roles and their interactions with cultural ideologies are examined. Third, plot elements and dialogues were assessed for stereotypical or subversive content. A detailed shot-by-shot breakdown of a pivotal scene demonstrates how camera angles, lighting, and dialogue encode the marginalization of minority women.

ANALYSIS

In *Rajkahini*, directed by Srijit Mukherji, a key scene shows the confrontation between Begum Jaan (played by Rituparna Sengupta) and local authorities. The shot begins with a wide shot framing Begum Jaan at the brothel's entrance, establishing her central position. The camera then shifts to a close-up of her determined expression, which highlights her resilience. Low-angle shots during her dialogue with the authorities emphasize her defiance and elevated status, and the high-contrast lighting intensifies the tension. This microanalysis exemplifies methodological rigor and offers concrete evidence. This structured approach enables a comprehensive exploration of films' portrayal of minority women.

Rajkahini examines the border dispute between East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and India, emphasizing the region's complex history of partition and centering on an eleven-woman brothel situated between the Debiganj and Haldibari districts. In the political dispute between Congress and the Muslim League, the area housing the Bengali brothel is incorporated into East Pakistan. The brothel's leader, Begum Jaan (played by Rituparna Sengupta), faces difficulties in maintaining operations after the partition. The Nawab of Rangpur (played by Rajatava Dutta) initially offers support but ultimately retracts it under the external pressure. Two brothel workers, Koli (played by Saayoni Ghosh) and Duli (played by Sohini Sarkar), are from the Dalit community and share mutual intimacy, indicating a bisexual orientation. Begum Jaan protects Shabnam (played by Ridhima Ghosh), who becomes a victim of rape and societal rejection during the Partition riots. These actions reflect a reality shaped by the intersecting oppression of caste, religion, and gender. Begum Jaan's Muslim identity and Koli and Duli's Dalit backgrounds together form a layered narrative of marginalization.

By manipulating social codes to safeguard women and negotiate with powerful men, Begum Jaan's character demonstrates an agency that surpasses mere victimhood. She resists patriarchal and societal constraints that are deeply rooted in her lived experiences. *Rajkahini* depicts minority women as agents and victims of patriarchy. Besides their vulnerability, Begum Jaan and other central characters are shown to be violent, cruel, and sometimes misogynistic. These complex traits reveal the intricate relationship between agency and oppression in their characterization. While Begum Jaan's agency is clear in her leadership and resilience, her ability to be violent complicates the traditional narratives of victimhood, suggesting that agency can appear in ways that both reinforce and challenge patriarchal norms. The portrayal of these women emphasizes the subtle dynamics in which their violence and misogyny may be seen as learned responses to marginalization, influenced by the oppressive systems they face in their lives. This layered depiction enables a more detailed exploration of their roles, resisting the reduction of simple stereotypes.

Another film, Birsa Dasgupta's *Criscross* (2018), depicts the daily struggles faced by working women and their sacrifices. The film features two minority women: Meher (played by Nusrat Jahan), a Muslim woman, and Suzy (played by Priyanka Sarkar), a Christian woman. Meher takes on the responsibility of her family after her father's death. She

experienced workplace harassment, including sexual harassment. The narrative portrays the Muslim woman as subjugated, deprived, and sexually vulnerable, highlighting her victimization within a patriarchal society. This portrayal can be linked to the concept of the "male gaze," which suggests that media often reflect a masculine perspective that objectifies women. However, the film shows Meher's inner resilience through her dialogues. In one poignant scene, when harassed at work, Meher asserts her right to work and support her family despite the harassment. She states, "No one will hold me down. My family depends on me." This moment showcases her defiance and agency in navigating oppressive structures, aligning with intersectionality theory, which examines how various forms of social stratification, such as race, gender, and class, overlap. Similarly, Suzy faces challenges at her workplace but finds strength in expressing her discontent. She affirms, "I choose where I belong, not society." These moments of speech reflect acts of resistance, providing a more complex narrative beyond victimhood. When Suzy goes out, some goons attempt to molest her. She is portrayed as vulnerable, easily accessible, and associated with sexual vulnerability, and she has endured domestic violence.

In the film *Criscross*, the scene begins with a wide shot of Meher's house. This shot signifies the overwhelming challenges she faces in her daily life, which sets the stage for her journey. As the scene develops, a subsequent shot shifts to her mother, dressed in traditional attire, symbolizing cultural expectations and expressing familial concerns over their financial struggles while inquiring about Meher's marital status. This transition highlights the contrast between her public appearance and her private hardships. A mid-shot then centers on Meher and her paralyzed brother, whose dependence on her care emphasizes her vital role within the household. This illustrates how their responsibilities influence their identities and choices. During Meher's encounter with the landlord, a close-up emphasizes her vulnerability, contrasting her fragile situation with the landlord's authoritative stance. This shift from a wide shot to a close-up not only maps her physical and emotional spaces but also invites the audience to explore her world more deeply and intimately. This scene also comments on the societal pressures and gender roles imposed on Meher, echoing ideas about visual representation and power dynamics within the narrative.

In contrast, a wide shot shows Suzy dropping her son off at school. The principal informs her that overdue school fees will prevent her son from entering the school. A close-up captures Suzy's reaction, with her eyes reflecting her ongoing anxiety about her son's future. Realizing the stakes, Suzy turns to Meher as they sit together in church later. In their brief shared glance, they communicate the weight of their burdens. However, the choice of a religious setting complicates the film's ideological position. The church not only provides a space for reflection but also reinforces themes of hope and communal strength. However, it also raises questions about whether faith can adequately solve tangible problems such as financial hardship. The camera pans to an image of Jesus, symbolizing hope, alongside Meher's whispered affirmation and her resolve to overcome challenges. This interplay of religious imagery and character interactions encourages viewers to consider the complexities of relying on faith amidst societal pressures.

During Meher's audition, the set is illuminated with dim lighting to emphasize the sexualized portrayal. Her revealing attire indicates the extent of her financial compromise. A subsequent wide shot fragments her body, visualizing her as a sex symbol. In contrast, the male actor's performance is shown through a long wide shot, emphasizing male dominance in the acting profession. This visual approach primarily positions female characters as objects of sexual desire. By openly recognizing the gaze at work, it becomes clear that these fragmented shots cater to predominantly male visual pleasure, reflecting a wider industry pattern in which female performers are often objectified. This systemic issue demonstrates the ongoing influence of the male gaze, a concept thoroughly examined by theorist Laura Mulvey, highlighting the power dynamic that subjugates women to images dictated by male perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Political dynamics play a vital role in shaping minority representation in Indian cinema. This political backdrop influences narrative themes and character development, often resulting in portrayals in which minority characters surrender their identities to gain societal acceptance. Although *Rajkabini* and *Crisscross* address important social issues, they reinforce existing stereotypes. *Rajkabini* highlights the struggles of minority women under patriarchy, while Begum Jaan and other Muslim female characters are depicted in traditional and subordinate roles.

The portrayal of minority women in supporting roles in Indian Bengali cinema consistently reinforces stereotypes and sustains the existing power structures. Dalit women are repeatedly depicted as impoverished and sexualized in films. For example, in *Crisscross*, minority women are objectified and rely on men. Meher's experiences in *Crisscross* depict patriarchal violence and systemic oppression, while Suzy's story highlights issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and poverty.

This study thus concludes that despite efforts to portray feminist and subaltern representations of minority women, these film texts are filled with internal conflicts and uncertainties caused by ingrained biases against the minority community in general and minority women in particular. To deepen the dialogue and continue addressing these biases, future researchers and filmmakers should examine these findings across other regional cinemas. Could such investigations uncover new narratives or challenge existing stereotypes? This open-ended inquiry encourages collaborative exploration, with the hope that new perspectives will shed light on and possibly resolve the complexities surrounding the representation of minority women in cinema.

Declaration: Premium version of Grammarly has been used for proofreading of the article, correcting and improving syntax and grammar.

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