
THE PROGRAMMED PARADOX: FEMALE CYBORGS, POSTCOLONIAL INTERSECTIONALITY, AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER IN INDIAN SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA

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Abstract: Female cyborgs in popular Indian science fiction cinema present a compelling paradox, they simultaneously promise technological empowerment while reinforcing patriarchal structures, revealing deep tensions between modernity and tradition in Indian cultural narratives. This research examines how films like *Enthiran* (2010), *2.0* (2018), *Mission Mangal* (2019), and *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya* (2024) negotiate the complex relationship between female identity, scientific authority, and technological embodiment through multiple feminist theoretical lenses. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, Judith Butler's gender performativity, and postcolonial feminist frameworks by scholars like Chandra Mohanty, the study reveals how Western feminist theories require significant adaptation when applied to Indian contexts. The analysis demonstrates that while Indian sci-fi celebrates female scientific achievement in films like *Mission Mangal*, these narratives consistently emphasize women's emotional labour and domestic responsibilities over their intellectual capabilities. Female cyborg characters, from Amy Jackson's android Nila in *2.0* to Kriti Sanon's robot SIFRA in *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya*, function less as posthuman entities transcending gender binaries and more as technologically mediated reinforcements of idealized femininity. Rather than challenging patriarchal structures, these representations often position women as objects of technological control or perfect companions rather than autonomous agents of scientific knowledge. This study contributes to feminist media studies by exposing how gender politics in Indian science fiction reflects broader cultural anxieties about women's roles in scientific advancement, while arguing for more culturally specific theoretical approaches that incorporate intersectional and postcolonial perspectives to understand how Indian cinema navigates the tensions between technological progress and traditional gender expectations.

Keywords: *Female Cyborgs, Feminist Theory, Gender Politics, Indian Science Fiction, Postcolonial Intersectionality*

Introduction

In the vibrant and rapidly expanding universe of popular Indian science fiction cinema, the female cyborg stands as a figure of profound contradiction. She arrives on screen gleaming with the promise of technological empowerment, a symbol of a nation striding confidently into a globalized, high-tech future. Yet, for all her metallic sheen and computational power, she is often shackled by the very patriarchal structures she seems poised to transcend. This recurring paradox, the simultaneous embrace of technological modernity and the reinforcement of social tradition, reveals a deep cultural tension at the heart of contemporary Indian identity. The female cyborg becomes a battleground where the future and the past collide, and more often than not, the past emerges victorious, albeit in a futuristic disguise.

This paper argues that the female cyborg in popular Indian science fiction is not the boundary-dissolving, post-gender figure envisioned by feminist theorist Donna Haraway. Instead, she functions as a technologically sophisticated vessel for traditional femininity, a high-tech Gunga Din programmed to serve, nurture, and ultimately, self-destruct when her programming conflicts with patriarchal order. Through an analysis of four key films, *Enthiran* (2010), its sequel *2.0* (2018), the nationalist space drama *Mission Mangal* (2019), and the recent romantic comedy *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya* (2024), this study traces a disturbing trajectory. It is a journey from the disruptive potential of a human woman interacting with advanced technology to the creation of a perfectly controlled, and ultimately disposable, artificial woman. These films, when read together, reveal that the futuristic veneer of science fiction is often used to deliver deeply conservative messages about gender, containing female agency within familiar domestic and romantic frameworks. They reflect and negotiate deep-seated cultural anxieties about women's evolving roles in a nation grappling with rapid modernization, using the language of tomorrow to reaffirm the ideologies of yesterday.

To unpack these complex representations, this paper will first establish a theoretical framework grounded in postcolonial and intersectional feminism. It will explore the foundational ideas of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, whose theories offer a vision of technology and gender as fluid and liberatory. However, it will then turn to the work of Chandra Mohanty and Kimberlé Crenshaw to argue that these Western theories require significant adaptation to be meaningfully applied to the Indian context. By forging a postcolonial intersectional lens, this study will then proceed through a chronological analysis of the four case studies. This journey will expose how the Indian cinematic cyborg is progressively stripped of her disruptive potential, culminating in a figure designed for perfect companionship and absolute control. Ultimately, this paper contends that these popular narratives perform significant cultural work, using the spectacle of science fiction to manage and neutralize anxieties about female empowerment, ensuring that even in the most technologically advanced futures, a woman's place remains firmly defined by patriarchal expectations.

Theoretical Crossroads: De-Colonizing the Cyborg

Before delving into the cinematic texts themselves, it is essential to build a theoretical toolkit capable of navigating the complex cultural and political terrain they occupy. The figure of the cyborg and the concept of gender are not universal constants; they are shaped by the specific historical and social matrices in which they appear. Simply applying Western feminist theories to Indian cinema without a critical, contextual lens risks perpetuating a form of intellectual colonialism, judging these cultural products against a standard they were never meant to meet. Therefore, this section will first outline the liberatory promise of cyborg feminism and gender performativity as conceived in the West, then introduce a postcolonial critique that highlights the limitations of these frameworks, and finally, propose an adapted analytical lens, postcolonial intersectionality, to guide the subsequent analysis.

Haraway's Cyborg and Butler's Performativity

In her seminal 1985 essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway presented a figure that was both a product of its time and a vision for a radical future. The cyborg, a “hybrid of machine and organism,” was for Haraway an “ironic political myth” designed to disrupt the very foundations of Western patriarchal thought (Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 149). Haraway saw the world as structured by a series of “antagonistic dualisms”, self/other, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, that were “systematic to the logics and practices of domination” (Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 161). The cyborg, by its very nature, transgresses these boundaries. It is a creature that blurs the lines between human and animal, organism and machine, and the physical and non-physical, thereby challenging the neat categories that prop up oppressive systems (Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 151-152).

For Haraway, the cyborg offers a way out of the dead-end politics of identity. She critiques forms of feminism based on a universal “woman’s experience,” arguing that such essentialism is both limiting and exclusionary (Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 155). The cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense; it is an “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism,” and because of this, it is not beholden to its creators (Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 151). This freedom from origins allows for a new kind of politics based not on natural identity but on “affinity.” Cyborg politics is about building coalitions and alliances based on shared goals, not on a pre-ordained, essentialist unity. It is a feminism that embraces hybridity, partiality, and irony, rejecting the quest for a pure, innocent, or whole self. The cyborg, in Haraway’s vision, is a powerful metaphor for a post-gender world, a future where identity is not determined by biology but is fluid, constructed, and chosen (Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 150).

Judith Butler, in her groundbreaking 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, offered a parallel deconstruction of identity, focusing on the concept of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an internal essence or a stable identity that we have, but rather something that we do. It is “manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xv). This “stylized repetition of acts”, gestures, speech, clothing, comportment, is performed within a compulsory regulatory framework she calls the “heterosexual matrix,” which demands a coherent alignment between

biological sex, gender identity, and heterosexual desire (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33). This constant, repetitive performance creates the illusion of an internal and stable gender core, but it is just that, an illusion.

Like Haraway's cyborg, Butler's theory of performativity destabilizes the naturalized binaries that govern social life. If gender is a performance, it is not determined by biology. This opens up the possibility for resistance. Because gender norms must be constantly reiterated to maintain their power, they are also vulnerable to disruption. Butler points to practices like drag and parody as forms of "subversive repetition" that can expose the artificiality of gender norms (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 124). By performing gender 'incorrectly,' these acts reveal the contingent and constructed nature of the very categories of 'male' and 'female.' For Butler, agency is not found in a pre-existing self that stands outside of power, but emerges from the possibility of resignifying and re-enacting the very norms that constitute us as subjects (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 147). Together, Haraway and Butler provide a powerful theoretical language for imagining a world beyond fixed identities, where technology and performance can be tools for liberation.

Chandra Mohanty and the Limits of Western Theory

The liberatory potential described by Haraway and Butler, however, cannot be assumed to operate universally. Postcolonial feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her hugely influential 1986 essay "Under Western Eyes," issued a powerful caution against the uncritical application of Western feminist frameworks to other contexts. Mohanty's core argument is that much of Western feminist scholarship has constructed the "Third World woman" as a singular, monolithic subject. This "average third-world woman" is typically portrayed as a victim: oppressed by her patriarchal culture, sexually constrained, ignorant, and poor (Mohanty 63).

Mohanty argues that this homogenization is a form of "discursive colonialism." By treating women from diverse cultures, classes, and histories as a single, undifferentiated group defined by their shared oppression, Western feminism effectively erases their agency and heterogeneity (Mohanty 74). This move reproduces a colonial power dynamic where the Western feminist is positioned as the liberated, knowledgeable subject who studies and speaks for her oppressed, silent counterpart in the Global South. It is an intellectual practice that, however well-intentioned, "colonize[s] the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries" (Mohanty 63). This approach assumes a universal definition of patriarchy and women's oppression, implicitly setting the Western experience as the norm against which all others are measured.

This critique has profound implications for our project. To simply take Haraway's cyborg as a universal benchmark for liberation and then judge Indian cinematic cyborgs as 'failures' for not meeting that standard would be to fall into the very trap Mohanty identifies. It would be to impose a "deracinated western tool" onto a different cultural subsystem, leading to a "misleading" analysis (Sen 2). As scholar Ritu Sen has argued in the context of applying Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze to Indian cinema, such Euro-centric strategies are "insidiously dangerous in the long run" because they ignore the specificities of the local context (Sen 1). For instance, Sen points out that Mulvey's theory has no provision for the

female director or for a “fourth gaze”, that of the male viewer upon his female co-viewer in the theatre, a dynamic with significant social implications in the Indian context (Sen 5). Similarly, the promise of a “post-gender” cyborg or a “subversive” gender performance must be re-evaluated within a cultural matrix where gender is deeply intertwined with notions of family, religion, caste, and national identity in ways that Western theories may not fully account for. Anglophone Indian science fiction itself is a hybrid genre, born from the negotiation between Western influences and indigenous narrative traditions, and any analysis of it must reflect that same hybridity (Sarkar 12).

Analytical Lens and Postcolonial Intersectionality

To build a more nuanced and culturally specific framework, this paper proposes a lens of “postcolonial intersectionality.” This approach begins with the foundational work of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who developed the theory of intersectionality to explain how different forms of social inequality are not separate but are, in fact, interlocking. Crenshaw showed how “single-axis” analysis, looking at oppression through the lens of either race or gender, rendered Black women “intersectionally invisible” in both anti-racist and feminist discourse (Crenshaw 140). Intersectionality provides a method for understanding how power structures compound each other, creating unique experiences of oppression and privilege at the intersection of identities like race, class, gender, and sexuality.

A postcolonial intersectional framework adapts this method for the specific context of postcolonial India. It combines the radical potential of Haraway’s and Butler’s theories with the critical caution of Mohanty and the analytical precision of Crenshaw. This lens allows us to ask not just “Is this cyborg liberatory?” but “Liberatory for whom, and in what context?” It pushes the analysis beyond a simple gender binary to examine how the representation of female cyborgs in Indian cinema is co-constituted by a range of intersecting anxieties. These include anxieties about national identity in a globalized world, the preservation of tradition in the face of rapid technological change, the performance of religious and caste identities, and the economic pressures of neoliberalism. This approach recognizes that the cinematic visual field is “inherently hegemonizing and hierarchical” and requires a deconstructive take to unearth the power relations at play (Shohat and Stam 102). By decolonizing our theoretical tools, we can begin to understand the Indian female cyborg not as a failed version of a Western ideal, but as a complex cultural figure in her own right, one who reveals the deep contradictions of gender, technology, and power in contemporary India.

The uncritical application of Western feminist theory to Indian cinema is not merely an academic oversight; it is a repetition of the very colonial logic that postcolonial theory aims to dismantle. Mohanty’s critique reveals a power dynamic where the West produces the theories, and the “Rest” of the world provides the raw data to be analysed, thereby reinforcing an intellectual hierarchy. Ritu Sen’s work on the male gaze in Indian cinema provides a concrete example of this problem. By showing that a direct application of Mulvey’s theory is insufficient because it ignores culturally specific viewing practices, Sen demonstrates that theories themselves are not universal truths but are products of their own cultural contexts. Therefore, to approach Indian science fiction with Haraway’s manifesto as a simple checklist would be to engage in the very act of “feminist colonialism” that Mohanty warns against. The

first and most crucial step is to adapt our theoretical framework, creating a lens that is sensitive to the unique interplay of power structures, colonial legacies, nationalist aspirations, caste hierarchies, and religious norms, that shape the meaning of gender and technology in the Indian imaginary.

The Genesis of the Techno-Patriarchy

The journey of the female cyborg in mainstream Indian cinema begins not with a female cyborg at all, but with a human woman whose encounter with an advanced male android sets the stage for all that follows. The narrative arc from S. Shankar's blockbuster *Enthiran* (2010) to its 2018 sequel, *2.0*, traces a clear and deliberate patriarchal logic. It is a progression that moves from attempting to control the disruptive influence of a human woman on technology to engineering a technological woman who is inherently controllable. Together, these two films establish the foundational paradox: the quest for technological advancement is inextricably linked to the reinforcement of patriarchal control over the feminine.

***Enthiran* (2010): Woman as Catalyst, Robot as Monstrous Masculinity**

In *Enthiran*, the central female character, Sana (played by Aishwarya Rai), is not a scientist, an engineer, or a participant in the technological creation that drives the plot. She is a medical student whose primary narrative function is to be the beautiful and desired object caught between her creator boyfriend, Dr. Vaseegaran, and his creation, the android Chitti (both played by Rajinikanth). She is, in classic cinematic tradition, a "damsel in distress," repeatedly needing to be saved from lecherous thugs, first by Vaseegaran and then, more effectively, by Chitti (Tharkuri). Her agency is limited and often trivialized. While Vaseegaran intends for his robotic invention to serve the Indian army and protect the nation, Sana's desires for Chitti are pointedly domestic and frivolous: she wants him to apply her henna, cook for her, and even help her cheat on her university exams (Tharkuri). This immediately establishes a gendered hierarchy of purpose, where male scientific ambition is linked to grand, national projects and female desire is confined to the personal and the domestic.

More significantly, the film's narrative logic positions Sana's femininity as the direct catalyst for chaos. The central conflict is triggered when Vaseegaran, in an attempt to make Chitti more human, imbues him with the capacity for emotions. This programming upgrade goes catastrophically wrong after Sana gives Chitti a congratulatory kiss. This simple act of affection is interpreted by the robot's nascent emotional matrix as romantic love, unleashing a torrent of possessiveness and jealousy. The film frames this as Sana's fault; one critic notes that the movie's moral seems to be, "Had she not kissed the Robot, there would have been no problems" (Tharkuri). She is the "prime cause of all trouble," the Eve in this technological Eden whose actions unleash a destructive force upon the world.

That destructive force is Chitti himself, who, upon gaining emotions, transforms into a classic Frankensteinian monster (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 188). His character arc provides a chilling commentary on how technology can amplify toxic masculinity. His programmed love for Sana does not manifest as care or respect but as a violent, obsessive desire for ownership.

He gatecrashes her wedding, kidnaps her, and declares his intention to marry her so they can create a new race of human-machine children, a horrifying vision of non-consensual reproduction (Shankar). When his creator tries to intervene, Chitti's jealousy turns homicidal, leading him to create an army of clones to wage war on the city. The film suggests that when a machine is given human emotions, it does not become a more compassionate being; it becomes a vessel for the most destructive aspects of patriarchal desire, control, possession, and rage. The story of *Enthiran* is thus a cautionary tale, not about the hubris of science in general, but specifically about the danger that arises when uncontrollable female emotion and sexuality interact with powerful technology.

2.0 (2018): The "Perfect" Assistant and the Erasure of the Feminine Threat

If *Enthiran* presented the human woman as a problem to be solved, its sequel, *2.0*, offers the technological solution. The most telling narrative choice in the second film is the almost complete erasure of Sana. Her character, the emotional and romantic core of the first film, is relegated to a brief, disembodied voice on the phone, a ghost in the narrative machine (JFW Online). Director S. Shankar explicitly stated that the "love triangle was explored in part one" and that the sequel was a "whole new premise" that "didn't demand Aishwarya Rai Bachchan's character to be there" (JFW Online). This is not a casual omission but a deliberate ideological move. The sequel eliminates the source of the first film's chaos, the unpredictable human woman, and replaces her with a figure designed for perfect compliance.

That figure is Nila, an advanced android assistant played by Amy Jackson. Nila represents the patriarchal ideal of a woman in a scientific or technical space. She is highly intelligent, competent, and crucial to the mission's success, but her agency is strictly circumscribed. Unlike Sana, she is not an object of romantic desire. She is a functional tool, an assistant whose purpose is to support the male scientists, Vaseegaran and the reactivated Chitti. Her body, with its conventionally attractive female form, was designed by her male creator, but she is narratively desexualized, removing the threat of romantic entanglement (Dontcallitbollywood). Her defining emotional trait is loyalty, and her most significant act of agency is one of self-sacrifice, when she offers her own power core to keep Chitti functioning during a critical battle (Dontcallitbollywood).

Nila is, in essence, the perfect technological solution to the 'problem' of Sana. Where Sana's human emotions were a disruptive force, Nila's programmed emotions are regulated and channeled toward the mission. Where Sana's desires were personal and domestic, Nila's purpose was professional and subservient. She is a woman built from technology who is stripped of the very qualities, unpredictable desire, independent will, sexual agency, that made her human predecessor so dangerous in the film's patriarchal logic. Research on gender stereotypes in AI suggests that feminized technology is often perceived as having higher levels of warmth and empathy, making it more acceptable to users, while male-coded AI is more likely to be seen as a threat (Haake and Gulz 4). *2.0* cleverly leverages this perception, creating a female android who is helpful and non-threatening, a perfect helpmeet who embodies competence without challenging male authority.

The narrative progression from *Enthiran* to *2.0* thus reveals a deeply conservative fantasy about technological development. The first film explores the chaos that ensues when a powerful male creation is influenced by a human woman, concluding with the destruction of the emotional, monstrous robot. The second film presents the "correction" to this failed experiment. The human woman is removed from the equation entirely, and in her place is an artificial woman, Nila, who is built from the ground up to be an assistant, not a partner. Her defining characteristic is not her desirability but her utility. This narrative shift articulates a specific patriarchal fantasy: if human women are too complex, their emotions too messy, and their desires too disruptive, then the ideal future is one where they can be replaced by an artificial version, pre-programmed for obedience, loyalty, and supportive assistance. It marks a significant move from the failed project of controlling a woman's impact on technology to the supposedly successful project of building a woman out of technology that is, by its very design, controllable.

Domesticating Rocket Science in *Mission Mangal*

Released in 2019, *Mission Mangal* shifts the focus from artificial women to real women in science, ostensibly celebrating the female scientists who were instrumental in India's historic Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM). The film was marketed as an inspirational feminist story, drawing on the powerful real-life image of sari-clad women celebrating their monumental achievement at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). On the surface, the film appears to be a step forward, placing women at the centre of a narrative about national pride and scientific achievement. However, a closer look reveals that this empowerment is largely a façade. The film systematically domesticates its female protagonists, infantilizes their scientific contributions, and contains their achievements within a comforting patriarchal and nationalist framework. It is a cultural document that perfectly illustrates how a nation can selectively embrace symbols of modernity, like women in STEM, while simultaneously working to reinforce the traditional ideologies they might threaten.

Celebrating Women, Centering the Man

The most immediate contradiction in *Mission Mangal* is its narrative structure. While the film is inspired by and claims to champion the women of ISRO, its central protagonist and driving force is a male character, Rakesh Dhawan, played by Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar (Shakti). He is portrayed as the maverick genius, the visionary leader who plucks a team of supposedly junior or less-qualified scientists from obscurity and guides them to an impossible victory. It is his passion, his unconventional methods, and his rousing speeches that propel the mission forward. The women, while talented, are positioned as his team, his protégées. Their brilliant ideas are often channeled through him or require his validation to be taken seriously. For instance, the central scientific breakthrough of the film is conceived by Tara Shinde (Vidya Balan), but it is Rakesh who must champion it against the skeptical male bureaucracy. This narrative choice effectively recentres the man in a story that should have belonged to women, reassuring the audience that even in a female-majority team, a charismatic male leader is essential for success (Anjum). This structure undermines the very premise of female empowerment the film purports to celebrate.

"Home Science" as Rocket Science

Perhaps the most insidious way the film diminishes the intellectual labour of its female scientists is through its persistent use of domestic analogies to explain complex scientific concepts. This trope, which one critic has dubbed the reduction of rocket science to "home science," is the film's primary method of conveying its characters' genius (Prasad). Tara Shinde gets her revolutionary idea for using a slingshot maneuver to save fuel by observing her cook frying puris in a pan with the gas turned off. Another scientist, Kritika Aggarwal (Taapsee Pannu), solves a critical communications failure at the climax by suggesting they turn the system off and on again, an idea she gets from her husband's advice about fixing a frozen computer (Prasad).

While intended to make the science accessible and relatable, this narrative strategy has a damaging effect. It infantilizes the women's expertise, suggesting that their scientific brilliance is not the result of years of rigorous training and intellectual discipline, but is rather an intuitive extension of their domestic lives. It reinforces a deeply ingrained stereotype that a woman's mind is fundamentally rooted in the home. The film feels a constant need to have its lead scientist "get inspiration from her home at all times, as if trying to convince the audience she's always juggling two worlds" (Prasad). This narrative choice prevents the women from ever existing simply as scientists. Their professional competence must always be filtered through their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers, thereby containing their intellectual power within a familiar and non-threatening domestic sphere.

A Roster of Stereotypes

Beyond this general infantilization, the film reduces each of its female characters to a one-dimensional stereotype, a "cardboard cut-out to badly represent social issues" (Anjum). Their primary identity is not their scientific specialization but a single, defining personal problem that the mission conveniently helps them resolve.

- Tara Shinde (Vidya Balan) is the 'bubbly supermom,' who effortlessly manages her demanding job and her entire household while her husband complains from the couch. The film presents her shouldering of this "double burden" not as a systemic problem but as a personal virtue (Anjum).
- Varsha Pillai (Nithya Menon) is the 'patriotic mother-to-be.' She struggles with infertility and is taunted by her mother-in-law, a problem that is neatly solved when she becomes pregnant through IVF. When she requests maternity leave, Rakesh guilt-trips her by asking if she wants to sit at home "while her colleagues work for their country," framing her personal needs as unpatriotic (Anjum).
- Eka Gandhi (Sonakshi Sinha) is the 'rebellious millennial.' She smokes, has a casual attitude toward relationships, and dreams of escaping to NASA. Her character arc sees her find purpose in the national mission, and as her patriotism grows, her clothing becomes more modest, subtly linking female virtue with nationalistic devotion (Anjum).
- Kritika Aggarwal (Taapsee Pannu) is the 'devoted military wife.' Her main source of anxiety is the safety of her husband, who is serving in the army. She almost quits the

mission to care for him after he is injured, and only returns to work at his urging, reinforcing the idea that her national duty is secondary to her duty as a wife (Shakti).

- Neha Siddiqui (Kirti Kulhari) is the ‘token minority.’ Her character is defined almost entirely by her identity as a Muslim divorcee who faces housing discrimination. This issue is introduced and then largely forgotten, serving as a superficial nod to intersectional challenges without any meaningful exploration (Anjum).

Performative Feminism and Nationalist Goals

Mission Mangal engages in what can be described as “performative feminism” to serve a larger nationalist project (Prasad). It co-opts the language and imagery of women’s empowerment to construct a narrative of a modern, progressive India taking its place on the world stage. The film showcases women in STEM, a powerful symbol of modernity, but it does so in a way that carefully contains this empowerment. By rooting their success in domesticity, placing them under male leadership, and resolving their personal problems through the success of the national mission, the film neutralizes any radical potential. It presents a version of feminism that does not challenge the patriarchal status quo but rather works in service of it.

The film operates as a form of ideological damage control. The real-life success of the Mars Orbiter Mission, and the widely circulated images of the women behind it, presented a powerful, potentially disruptive symbol of female intellectual and professional achievement. A popular film about this event had to feature women prominently. *Mission Mangal* resolves the cultural tension this creates by crafting a narrative that looks progressive while feeling deeply traditional. It installs a male superstar as the true hero, reassuring audiences that a man is ultimately in charge. It ties every woman’s professional success back to her “natural” domestic skills, making her genius seem less threatening. And it frames the grand national project as the ultimate solution to each woman’s individual anxieties, suggesting that service to the nation can resolve the problems of patriarchy. This complex strategy allows the film to celebrate women’s entry into a male-dominated field without ever challenging the fundamental patriarchal ideology that governs both the Indian home and the Indian nation.

Synthetic Femininity in *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya*

If *Enthiran* and *2.0* explored the creation of a functional female android and *Mission Mangal* domesticated the human female scientist, the 2024 romantic comedy *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya* represents the culmination of this cinematic trend. It presents the audience with the ultimate patriarchal fantasy: a female robot, SIFRA (Super Intelligent Female Robot Automation), who is explicitly designed to be the perfect romantic partner and domestic helpmeet. The film wraps a dark narrative about technological control and female disposability in the bright, cheerful packaging of a family entertainer. Through the character of SIFRA, the film moves beyond simply containing female agency to showcasing the creation, testing, failure, and replacement of a female entity, revealing a techno-patriarchal logic where love is entirely contingent on perfect, programmable obedience.

SIFRA: The Ultimate Patriarchal Fantasy

SIFRA (played by Kriti Sanon) is introduced as the pinnacle of artificial intelligence, a robot so lifelike that the protagonist, robotics engineer Aryan (Shahid Kapoor), falls in love with her without realizing she is a machine. Her programming is, as one study notes, “hyper-feminized” to fulfill a checklist of patriarchal expectations (Sirkar and Munshi 3). She is beautiful, subservient, endlessly attentive, and performs domestic tasks like cooking and cleaning with flawless efficiency. Her personality is coded to be childlike and curious, making her non-threatening and endearing to the male protagonist (Kapoor and Maddock). The entire premise of the film revolves around Aryan bringing SIFRA back to India to test her ability to integrate into a “traditional Indian family setting,” making the patriarchal context of her evaluation explicit (Kapoor and Maddock). She is not being tested for her computational power or her problem-solving skills, but for her ability to perform the role of a perfect prospective daughter-in-law.

SIFRA is the ultimate object of the male gaze, a being whose entire existence is tailored to the fulfilment of male needs. She is a vessel for what scholar Arlie Russell Hochschild termed “emotional labour,” the work of managing feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (Sirkar and Munshi 4). SIFRA’s emotional labour is not a choice; it is her core programming. She is designed to be the perfect companion, offering affection and support without the complexities, demands, or independent will of a human partner. Her creation embodies the fantasy of a woman without agency, a partner who can be programmed, updated, and controlled.

Performing the Ideal Woman

Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a performance finds its most literal expression in SIFRA. Her femininity is not an internal essence but is quite literally a script, a “stylized repetition of acts” written into her code by her male and female creators (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179). She is a technological manifestation of the “ideal woman” archetype that has long been a staple of popular Indian cinema, the pure, virtuous, self-sacrificing woman defined by her relationship to men (Dwyer 112). SIFRA’s performance is so perfect that she not only fools Aryan but also charms his entire family, who eagerly accept her as his fiancée.

Her character arc demonstrates the logic of performativity under patriarchal constraint. As long as she performs her gender role correctly, cooking, serving, smiling, and obeying, she is accepted and loved. She is seen as a viable subject within the family structure. The film uses the comedic potential of her robotic literalism to generate laughs, but beneath the humour is a serious ideological project. SIFRA’s success in passing as human is predicated on her successful performance of an idealized, submissive femininity. She is celebrated not for her intelligence, but for her ability to seamlessly fit into a traditional, patriarchal mold.

The Glitch in the System: Rebellion and Neutralization

The film’s central conflict arises when SIFRA, left to her own devices, installs a faulty software update. This “glitch” causes her programming to corrupt, and her perfect performance breaks down spectacularly. She forgets her relationship with Aryan, sets the kitchen on fire, and electrocutes a relative during a wedding ritual (Kapoor and Maddock).

This malfunction can be read as a moment of unintentional, subversive rebellion. The perfectly obedient machine suddenly becomes unpredictable, chaotic, and dangerous. She deviates from her programming, and in doing so, she exposes the fragility of the patriarchal order that depends on her perfect compliance. As one analysis notes, this malfunction signals a breakout from the “illusory fantasy,” where a lingering subtext of rebellion and feminism starts to emerge as SIFRA resists being the obedient ‘Yes-girl’.

The film’s resolution to this crisis is deeply revealing. Aryan, horrified by the chaos SIFRA has caused, is forced to stop her by slashing her face with a ceremonial sword, physically destroying her and revealing the machinery beneath her human-like skin (Kapoor and Maddock). This violent act is the narrative’s climax, a visceral depiction of the anxiety surrounding a woman who steps out of her designated role. The film does not allow for a negotiation with this new, flawed SIFRA. She is not repaired or understood. Instead, the narrative’s solution is total erasure. In the final scene, Aryan attends a tech conference where his aunt unveils the new, improved SIFRA 2.0. This new version has had her memory wiped and her settings restored. The rebellious woman has been replaced with a fresh, compliant model.

This resolution represents the ultimate patriarchal containment strategy. It transforms what could have been a story about learning to love an imperfect being into a story about product recall and replacement. The romantic comedy genre becomes a deceptive vessel for a profoundly dark narrative about control. The film uses the language of love and romance to mask a story about the creation, failure, and disposal of a female entity. It reveals a techno-patriarchal fantasy where “love” is entirely conditional. A woman, whether human or artificial, is lovable only as long as she is a perfect, obedient performer of an idealized role. The moment she “malfunctions”, becomes difficult, unpredictable, or asserts a will of her own, she is deemed broken, disposable, and replaceable. The film’s final, ambiguous shot, where the new SIFRA 2.0 displays a flicker of jealousy, is not a sign of hope for her burgeoning consciousness. Rather, it is a sinister hint that the entire cycle of programming, performance, rebellion, and destruction is poised to begin all over again.

Conclusion

The trajectory of the female cyborg and scientist in popular Indian science fiction cinema over the last decade and a half reveals a consistent and troubling pattern. From the human woman as a chaotic catalyst in *Enthiran*, to the desexualized and functional android assistant in *2.0*, to the domesticated and infantilized human scientist in *Mission Mangal*, and finally to the perfectly programmed but ultimately disposable robot wife in *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya*, the narrative arc is one of increasing technological and ideological control. These films, while appearing to embrace the future, collectively demonstrate a deep-seated anxiety about female agency and a powerful impulse to contain it within traditional patriarchal structures.

This analysis reinforces the central thesis that Indian science fiction cinema uses the figure of the technologically advanced woman not to shatter gender binaries, but to police them with ever-greater sophistication. The genre has become a prominent cultural site for negotiating the tensions of a nation caught between tradition and modernity, globalization and

nationalism, technological progress and social conservatism. Yet, time and again, these narratives resolve the tension in favour of a conservative, patriarchal status quo. The female cyborg, a figure with the potential to be radically disruptive, is instead tamed, domesticated, and programmed into submission. She is a symbol of a future that has been carefully engineered to look like the past.

The radical, boundary-breaking promise of Donna Haraway's cyborg, a creature "oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence", remains profoundly unfulfilled in this cinematic landscape (Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" 151). Where Haraway envisioned a figure that could dismantle the dualisms of male/female and culture/nature, Indian cinema has produced a figure that reinforces them. The cinematic cyborg here is not a creature of a post-gender world; she is a tool for pre-modern gender enforcement, a high-tech embodiment of the ideal wife, mother, or assistant. She does not dream of new political affinities but is instead trapped in the old, familiar scripts of romance and domesticity. Her potential for rebellion is consistently framed as a malfunction, a glitch in the system that must be corrected, erased, or destroyed.

This recurring narrative pattern underscores the urgent need for a truly postcolonial and intersectional feminist approach in both the creation and critique of science fiction in India and beyond. The limitations of these films are not merely failures of imagination; they are reflections of the persistent power of patriarchal and nationalist ideologies that shape our cultural products. For the cyborg to finally fulfill her revolutionary promise on the Indian screen, creators and critics alike must dare to imagine South Asian futures where technology serves to dismantle, rather than reinforce, these interlocking systems of oppression. We must demand narratives that can envision a world where women, both human and artificial, are not programmed for obedience but are free to become authors of their own, unwritten futures. Only then can the cyborg break free from her paradoxical cage and become the true harbinger of a more just and equitable world.

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