

## Tom Boys in Cinema Breaking Gender Norms and Facing Societal Backlash

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### Abstract

*This study examines the role and representation of tomboy characters in cinema and OTT series, with a focus on how these representations challenge the gender normal and in turn provoke societal backlash. Using feminist film theory, gender performativity, and cross-cultural analysis, it analyzes films from European cinema such as Malena and Perfume, and South Asian productions such as Heeramandi and Jubilee. Employing textual analysis and interviews with those within or related to the entertainment industry, this research traces the roots of tomboy depiction and audience reaction. Anchored by the works of Judith Butler, Laura Mulvey, and Yvonne Tasker, this study investigates how tomboys become a disrupting force in the face of traditional gender norms, revealing social tensions and punitive responses to such a rebellion. This research also highlights cultural differences, noting that Western narratives often depict tomboyism at a personal capacity dealing with individualistic freedom, whereas South Asian stories of employ it with cultural inauthenticity and moral transgression. OTT platforms, however, increasingly portray tomboy characters with nuance, allow for a more inclusive and balanced understanding of gender identity.*

**Keywords:** cinema, tomboy, gender, norms, movie.

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## 1. Introduction

For many, cinema acts as a mirror to society, yet it's more powerful use comes from the counterculture examinations of roles, individuals, ideas, etc. While mainstream media concerns itself more with what can be described as feminine portrayals of women, there exist a litany of outliers that go against the grain. The gender non-conforming portrayals of women challenge conventional depictions. 2000. *Cinema and Feminism*. Oxford University Press.

We find one such outlier in the "tomboy." As a term, its use has evolved as much as the medium of film itself, as our collective consciousness and our ideas of social constructs evolve. This term can be boiled down to girls or young women with masculine traits. While simple on the surface, this depiction of the rejection of femininity's association with fragility and by extension a rebelling against the conformist dichotomy of gender ideals.

Kaplan uses the framework of feminist film theory and examines the construction of gender in films, emphasizing both films and characters that uphold and challenge gender norms. 1993. *Gender, Genre, and Action Films: Spectacular Bodies*. The Routledge Press. Tasker studies how gender is portrayed in action movies, paying special attention to how masculinity and femininity are portrayed and how some movies defy these expectations. Of these, the representation of "tomboy" female characters who display characteristics and actions commonly linked to Characters That Engage: *Cinema, Emotion, and Fiction*. The Clarendon Press. According to Smith's book, viewers interact with characters that challenge gender stereotypes, such as "tomboys." It touches on how these individuals generate emotional and intellectual engagement that defies preconceived assumptions of gender.

This study aims to investigate how tomboy girls are portrayed in movies, emphasizing how these characters defy gender norms and the repercussions that follow. Alannah Turner (2015). "Tomboys, Masculinity, and the Gender Binary: Examining the Representations of Gender Nonconformity in Film". *Gender Studies Journal*, This article examines the portrayal of tomboys, their rejection of gender norms, and the reaction of society in addition to reconsideration of the gender binary. This study aims to look at how and why tomboys are created, how they are treated by society at large and how they response to social barriers. In this way, we look at the larger cultural attitudes toward gender nonconformity through an examination of movies from different historical periods and cultural contexts. Anoop Ayak and Mary Jane Kehily (2006). *The British Journal of Educational Sociology* through Judith Butler's writings, this article analyzes gender subversion and discusses how tomboy characters in films stand in opposition to gender stereotypes while dealing with social pressures. Judith Butler. (1990). *Feminism and Identity Subversion: Gender Trouble*. Routledge. Butler's work on gender performativity harks on the fluidity of gender as a performance, such that it is determined by social norms rather than a fixed identity. In turn this piece provides important insights into how tomboy characters in movies garner as an alternate gender performance, challenging tradition. This

article also hopes to view the evolution of the tomboy cliché from early depiction to more contemporary ones.

The ultimate goal of this study is to add to the current discourse around gender representation in the media. By presenting femininity as a spectrum rather than a rigid binary, the capacity of film to both uphold and subvert the status quo, the role of the tomboy will be clarified by this study's examination of the intersection between gender, cinema, and social conventions. Christine Gledhill (1987). *Identity, Gender, and Representation*. In *Postmodern Cinema, Gender Meets Genre*. Blackwell. Gledhill offers a thorough examination of the ways in which various film genres depict gender norms and the ways in which specific characters such as tomboys challenge these traditional depictions in postmodern cinema. The article will make the case through this investigation that although tomboy characters in movies have made great progress in eradicating gender stereotypes, Mississippi University Press. Brown examines how tomboy and action heroine characters defy gender norms but still face cultural resistance, which reflects larger societal issues for gender acceptance and inclusivity.

This study adds to the investigation of how tomboy girls are portrayed in movies and over-the-top television shows, emphasizing how these characters subvert gender norms and the social responses they elicit. Carol Quires and Elise Backer. (2009). *Popular Culture and Feminism: Critical Perspectives*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. This book explores the application of feminist philosophy to popular media, including television and movies, providing insights on how tomboys are portrayed and how society reacts. This study will investigate how visual storytelling and narrative structures aid in the development of tomboy characters and their journeys through the examination of movies and television shows including *Jubilee*, *Perfume*, *Heeramandi*, and *Malena*. Rosalind Gill. (2007). *The media and gender*. The Polity Press. Gill's research offers a comprehensive examination of how gender is portrayed in the media.

## 1.1 Objectives

**RO1:** To Examine the Representation of Gender: Analyze the representation of women, including tomboy characters, in the chosen OTT series (\*Heeramandi\* and \*Jubilee\*) and films (\*Malena\* and \*Perfume\*).

Determine recurrent themes, stereotypes, and character roles; pay particular attention to the ways in which tomboy characters subvert conventional gender roles.

**RO2:** To Examine the Role of OTT Platforms: Examine how OTT platforms affect the portrayal of women and gender nonconformity in contrast to traditional film.

Examine whether OTT platforms present more complex, diverse, and empowering representations of women, especially those who challenge social conventions.

**RO3:** To contrast and compare cultural representations: Examine how women and tomboy characters are portrayed in *\*Malena\** (Italian), *\*Perfume\** (German), *\*Heeramandi\**, and *\*Jubilee\** (Indian) in relation to various cultural contexts.

Recognize how social norms and cultural influences influence gender representation.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

"Tomboys in Film" "Breaking Gender Norms and Facing Societal Backlash" would examine previous studies and academic debates on how tomboy characters are portrayed in the media, emphasizing their function in questioning gender norms and the repercussions they encounter in social structures. Using a variety of sources from the fields of film studies, gender studies, and media analysis, the review will look at important topics such as gender depiction, media influence, and the cultural impact of tomboy characters.

### **Gender Representation in Cinema and Media**

Within poetics and beyond, the portrayal of women has long been a scholarly concern, subject to many riveting and insightful critiques and analyses. By focusing on how media reinforces or subverts gender norms, critical insights are made. Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," puts forth the argument that women are often treated as passive objects of male desire.

Judith Butler's theory adds depth to this critique by proposing gender as performative and fluid rather than a fixed identity. Tomboys exhibit agency that was previously solely associated with men. This challenge to the binary offers an interesting contrast. However, as Jack Halberstam explores in *Female Masculinity* (1998), this divergence from the norm is mostly met with scorn.. These characters face isolation (whether internalized or external), violence, and alienation as seen in the films *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993). These films have the undercurrents of the struggle within and the struggle without.

### **Tomboy Characters and Narrative Structures**

Tomboys play an important role in addressing societal issues surrounding gender identity. Susan Hayward (*Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2000) proposes that these characters subvert conventional arcs to express individuality by non-conformity. Yvonne Tasker (*Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, 2002) highlights how they challenge societal expectations by rejecting traditional ideals of femininity.

Films like *Perfume* (2006) and *Malena* (2000) illustrate these struggles. *Perfume* focuses on the psychological aspect whereas *Malena* focuses on the patriarchal cultural structures.

With OTT platforms, an emergence of varied thought is allowed. This has given way to a deeper exploration of such characters. Narratives in *Heeramandi* and *Jubilee*, for example, provide nuanced portrayals of tomboy figures striving to strike balance between tradition and modernity, however sometimes nuance and subtlety are not preferred.

In action cinema, tomboy characters may have become more common but they resist traditional roles especially considering how objectified women were in such genre films. Yvonne Tasker (*Spectacular Bodies*, 1993) and Sherrie A. Inness (*Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, 1999) show how these figures challenge societal molds. Across media, tomboy narratives expand gender representation and encourage audiences to question societal norms.

### **Cultural Context and Gender Representation**

Within the context of culture, the use of and the portrayal of gender, especially tomboy characters varies. Where Western films use tomboyism as a symbol of rebellion and individuality, the global South tends to focus more on struggles against familial and societal expectations (Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists*, 2006).

Such a contrast can be viewed in *Malena*, *Perfume*, *Heeramandi* and *Jubilee*. Here, the European setting of *Malena* and *Perfume* frames tomboyish as a rebellion to social oppression where the Indian OTT series *Heeramandi* and *Jubilee* showcases tomboys within traditional gender roles and communal pressures. This contrast highlight the role culture has in shaping tomboy characters and their respective societal responses (Brown, "'Maleness' and the Female Body," *Feminist Media Studies*, 2005).

Such cross-cultural contrasts highlight how media reflects distinct cultural norms, illustrating tomboyism either as rebellion or as a negotiation of societal expectations (Squires & Backer, *Popular Culture and Feminism*, 2009).

### **Societal Backlash and Consequences**

Defying traditional gender norms has historically resulted in strong social backlash. This is also true for the portrayal of this defiance. Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) shows how such characters are punished for their rebellion, serving as cautionary tales against questioning the gender binary and thus safeguarding the status quo. *Malena* and *Perfume* show tomboy characters faced with marginalization, rejection, or even symbolic violence. While *Malena* depicts ostracism, *Perfume* explores the psychological consequences of such a gender transgression. These portrayals are a mirror to both the oppressive realities of gender nonconformity and the potential for resistance (Dines & Humez, *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, 2011).

Through narrative techniques, these films highlight the cage of the normative gender. Christine Gledhill (1987) highlights how cinema negotiates gender identity, portraying tomboy characters as both subversive and constrained within societal expectations.

### **OTT Platforms and the Evolution of Gender Representation**

With time, gender representation in media has gone beyond the binary, becoming more inclusive and nuanced. This is especially true for OTT platforms, where the shackles of commerce are felt less than those in the production of traditional films. These platforms are then allow the exploration of gender identity with greater depth and complexity (Cunningham & Silver, Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World, 2013) and often warmth.

OTT series like Heeramandi and Jubilee show tomboys navigating individually with dealing with societal and cultural backlash. Unlike commercial or mainstream cinema, which adheres more to the gender binary, OTT series explore the friction between the release of empowerment and expression and the rigidity of social contracts and its backlash. Judith Halberstam (Masculinity in Women, 1998) emphasizes that such characters against the normative narrative embody both the resistance and the cost of such resistance against the patriarchy.

As OTT platform continue to redefine storytelling as well as production and distribution, they challenge traditional gender norms while inculcating an environment where deeper and more nuanced conversations can be had about societal frameworks and power structures that enforce conformity. By offering long-form narratives, these platforms provide richer, multi-layered explorations of gender nonconformity and showcase its broader implications (Cunningham & Silver, 2013).

### **Tomboy Characters and Societal Backlash**

In my literature review, I plan to explore how tomboy characters in films challenge traditional gender stereotypes and societal norms. These characters often face significant social obstacles, for going against the grain of patriarchal structures. Personal autonomy and Societal conformity meet at an intersection aptly portrayed in Heeramandi, where strong-willed female characters navigate rigid cultural and social construction, and in Malena, where the protagonist endures criticism for her rejection of gender norms.

### **Negative Perception of Tomboy Traits**

Since tomboys show the fragility of social constructs when pit against individuality and expression, this is often met with suspicion, scorn, and outright hostility in media portrayals. Their very existence unsettles power structures that demand and perpetuate conformity, labelling our tomboys as outsiders.

The tomboyish figures in Jubilee navigate a male-dominated film industry steeped in the objectification of women. Here, their very presence becomes a quiet rebellion against the entrenched norms that seek to define and confine femininity to a cage.

### **Judith Butler's Gender Performativity**

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity offers a framework to examine how tomboy characters unravel the illusion of binaries, blurring the line between the masculine and the feminine. Their very existence becomes an affront or challenge to cultural norms, embodying a quiet yet powerful rebellion against the constructs of traditional femininity. In the lush, historical backdrops of Heeramandi and Jubilee, these characters become living protests against the rigidity of society.

### **Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze**

Mulvey's hypothesis helps explain the visual framing of tomboy characters in these movies. These characters frequently still experience the male gaze despite their best efforts to avoid it, which serves to further entrench patriarchal control over how women's bodies and personalities are viewed.

### **Intersection of Visual Storytelling and Narrative Structure**

The literature review allows me to connect with how these characters are crafted through intricate narrative and visual techniques. In Heeramandi, the opulent imagery stands in stark contrast to the characters' inner turmoil, visually encapsulating the tension between personal identity and the weight of societal expectations. Meanwhile, Perfume employs a somber tone and evocative cinematography to underscore the tomboy character's isolation, framing her estrangement as both a narrative and aesthetic centerpiece.

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study examines tomboy characters in OTT shows and movies, examining how they defy gender expectations and encounter criticism from society. The theoretical framework of the study integrates media platform analysis, feminist film theory, gender performativity, narrative analysis, and cross-cultural studies. This method offers a thorough comprehension of the many cultural and media contexts in which tomboy characters are portrayed. In order to better comprehend how tomboy characters in modern media challenge gender conventions and deal with social reaction, the diagram will show the interconnected theories.



### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

In order to investigate how tomboy girls are portrayed in movies and how these characters defy gender expectations while encountering criticism from society, this study uses a qualitative research design with an emphasis on semi-structured interviews. The interviews, which provide further insights from industry insiders and viewers familiar with such characters, will supplement textual analysis of a few chosen films and television shows.

#### 3.2 Research Questions

**RQ1:** What characteristics or actions are highlighted to question conventional gender stereotypes, and how can tomboy characters in movies and over-the-top television shows undermine them?

**RQ2:** What kinds of social criticism are portrayed against tomboy characters in movies and over-the-top television shows, and how are these responses employed to support or challenge conventional gender norms?

**RQ3:** How are societal reactions against tomboy characters portrayed in films and OTT series by visual and narrative tactics, and how does this affect how viewers view gender norms?

**RQ4:** How do cultural settings affect how tomboy characters are portrayed and the types of social criticism they encounter in other nations, including Germany, Italy, India, and Pakistan?

#### 3.3 Data Collection Method

##### 3.3.1 Interviews

- **Participants:** A wide range of participants will be interviewed for the study, including: o Producers, screenwriters, and directors of motion pictures: to learn more about the artistic choices that go into how tomboy characters are portrayed in movies.
- **Scholars and film critics:** To investigate how tomboy representations are seen critically and how they affect culture.
- **Sampling Strategy:** Participants will be chosen using a purposive sampling strategy based on their familiarity with or participation with how gender is portrayed in movies. Participants will be selected from a range of backgrounds, including genders, geographical locations, and cultural settings.



- **Interview Type:** Semi-structured interviews will be used in this study, providing flexibility in examining various facets of gender representation while guaranteeing that important subjects are addressed.
- **Interview Length:** Each interview will last between fifteen and thirty minutes.
- **Interview Platform:** Due to logistical constraints, interviews will be conducted in person to provide accessibility for participants from all around the world.
- **Interview Questions:** The following topics will be covered in the questions:
  - I. The artistic intention behind tomboy character representation in movies.
  - II. How society and culture respond to these representations.
  - III. Opinions on how tomboy characters' challenge gender expectations.
  - IV. The empowerment and objectification of tomboy characters in visual narratives.
  - V. The social repercussions that these characters' experience in the stories and how these dynamics are reflected in the actual world

### 3.4 Textual Analysis

- A textual analysis of a few chosen movies and television shows will be done in addition to the interviews, with an emphasis on pieces like: *Malena* (2000), *Perfume* (2018), *Heeramandi* (2023), *Jubilee* (2023)
- This will make it easier to spot themes of social backlash and gender nonconformity in these works' narrative and visual frameworks.

### 3.5 Interview Data Analysis

**Thematic Analysis:** To find recurrent motifs in the portrayal of tomboy characters, thematic analysis will be used to examine the interview data. This analysis will include:

**Transcription:** To guarantee precision in data analysis, every interview will be verbatim transcribed.

**Coding:** With an emphasis on subjects like objectification, empowerment, gender subversion, and society responses, key themes will be recognized and coded.

**Pattern Identification:** The replies' recurring themes will be emphasized, with special attention paid to the characters' construction, coping mechanisms with social

demands, and the cultural relevance of their representation.

**Comparison with Textual Data:** In order to determine if audience and industry opinions and the depiction in the films are aligned or divergent, the themes gleaned from the interviews will be compared with the results of the textual analysis.

### **3.6 Sampling Strategy**

#### **3.6.1 Participant Selection**

Five people in all will be chosen for interviews. This figure ensures adequate diversity of opinion while being manageable for qualitative analysis.

The selection of participants will be based on their knowledge and experience with gender representation in film, whether through critical analysis or creative output.

### **3.7 Data Validation**

**Triangulation:** Triangulation will be used to validate the data by integrating information from textual analysis, interviews, and previous research. This will guarantee that the study is informed by a variety of viewpoints and that the conclusions are accurate and thorough.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Challenging Conventional Gender Norms in South Asian Media**

In Pakistani and Indian cinema, even in OTT Series, we've seen that tomboy characters highlight the contrast between the narrow definitions of traditional femininity and the expanse of womanhood expression. Our tomboys are characterized by engagement in sports, preference for western clothes, career focused - this all acts as a temporary disruption to the women's domestic roles. By stepping outside this narrow script - be it through athletic pursuits, frank speech, or Western attire - tomboys contest the very idea that women must adhere to a set expectation.

### **4.2 Tomboy Traits as a Temporary Phase**

Most of our respondents were in agreement, that in all the media they have consumed, they've seen tomboyism only as a fleeting phase, nothing more than a stage in life one must outgrow. Characters may start with hobbies or attire that's usually masculine coded, but most of these arcs end in the same way - our tomboys discover their femininity, which turns out to be according to tradition. In this way these arcs don't reaffirm the agency of our characters as much as they reaffirm social norms. This narrative pattern shows us that while media portrayal in Pakistan

and India do not shy away from nonconformity, they even show that it can exist. They however also show that they cannot educate. Tomboy characters undergoing this transitional period only create nonconformity as something to be conquered. This shows that while we believe tomboyism can exist in India and Pakistan, it must exist within certain limits.

### **4.3 Societal Criticism and Moral Policing**

Unlike Western forms of disapproval that tend to be more subtle, the criticism in the subcontinent can be explicit and moralistic. Pressure to conform ranges from emotional manipulation and emotional blackmailing as well as an open ridicule of “unfeminine” behavior. These negative reactions underscore the importance of and show the height of the pedestal upon which traditional womanhood is placed. The perceived threat that tomboy characters pose to these deeply rooted social structures is then suppressed by a stark reaction from the society covering the whole spectrum, from ridicule to ostracize.

### **4.4 Linking Tomboy Traits to Westernization and Rebellion**

Almost all respondents were able to draw a parallel between the characteristics of tomboyism in India and Pakistan with attire and values that can be considered Western. Some may even attribute this to a colonial mindset where what the West offers is greater, however all respondents considered that to be a false equivalency. Attire deemed too modern or outspoken behavior is considered foreign, marking these characters as inherently rebellious or even villainous, even as a threat to the fabric of society. By framing nonconformity as an outsider instead of an inherent expression of agency and femininity, narratives can justify stricter criticism, painting tomboy traits as culturally inauthentic and in need of correction.

### **4.5 Visual and Narrative Strategies Shaping Audience Perception**

Whereas the West contends with the nuclear family, and in recent times the demise of the nuclear family, in Pakistani and Indian productions, directors frequently showcase the extended family. Here the use of extended families living together in a joint system, communal settings, family gatherings, and color symbolism - all of these are considered attacked by characters with characteristics of tomboyism. Scenes of familial tension or pointed dialogue during celebrations are quite common. Add to this the public events where such characters are shown as antagonistic or as shameful, all this makes the nonconforming character's deviation more visible and socially charged. Here the viewer is invited to see her difference as significant and problematic. As a result, audiences may be persuaded to view gender nonconformity as something unnatural rather than a legitimate, if less common, feminine identity.

## 4.6 Slow Shifts and Emerging Complexity

While historically Indian and Pakistani narratives have used tomboy characters only as a device to reinforce conventional femininity, newer productions, including some OTT series, are beginning to use a more balanced, realistic, and authentic approach. Our respondents noted that evolving industry norms, the globalization of media, and evolving audience attitudes create a small but growing space for complex female portrayals that challenge social norms such as those seen in *Heeramandi* and *Jubilee*. However, these are marginal and there is still much more work to be done.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the Pakistani and Indian cultural landscape, tomboy characters function as boundary testers and sadly, not every ball that leaves this boundary is a four or sixer. Instead, they're ostracized or ridiculed and used as a measure to establish the limits of permissible feminine expression. While they sometimes momentarily expand the spectrum of how women can look, act, and engage in society, there is almost always a strong moralistic opposition. This then results in a depiction of tomboyishness that is both intriguing and unsettling, prompting viewers to feel the tension between evolving gender ideals and the enduring weight of cultural and traditional expectations.

### 5.1 Recommendation

In the Pakistani and Indian cultural landscape, tomboy characters challenge traditional boundaries of feminine expression but often face ridicule or ostracism, reinforcing restrictive norms. These portrayals, while intriguing, underscore the tension between evolving gender ideals and enduring cultural expectations. However, they also open the door for conversations about broader acceptance and the need to embrace diverse expressions of identity.

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