

The Absence of Women AI-Superheroes in Indian Cinema: Gender, Technology, and the Politics of Futurity

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Abstract

This paper investigates the absence of women AI-superheroes in Indian cinema and examines how this gap reflects broader gendered constructions of technology, power, and futurity. While global science fiction increasingly portrays female artificial intelligence figures as complex agents, Indian films engaging AI—such as *Enthiran* (2010), *Ra.One* (2011), and *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya* (2024)—continue to centre male technological authority. Even when female-coded AI characters appear, they are framed within romantic or relational narratives rather than positioned as autonomous superheroic protagonists. Drawing on feminist film theory and posthuman scholarship, including Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism, N. Katherine Hayles' posthumanism, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, this study argues that Indian cinema reproduces patriarchal associations between masculinity and technological mastery. Through textual analysis of selected films and engagement with industry patterns, the paper demonstrates how cinematic futurity is masculinized, while female AI embodiment is aestheticized or domesticated. The absence of women AI-superheroes is therefore not incidental but ideological, revealing structural limitations in India's technological imagination and underscoring the need for more inclusive representations of digital power.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Indian Cinema; Gender Representation; Posthumanism; Cyborg Feminism; Superhero Genre; Patriarchy; Technology and Futurity

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative technological and cultural force of the twenty-first century. Across global cinema, AI figures serve as metaphors for anxieties surrounding autonomy, ethics, embodiment, and control. Yet these representations are never ideologically neutral; they are shaped by deeply embedded gendered assumptions. While Western science fiction increasingly features female-presenting AI characters with narrative agency—such as Ava in *Ex Machina* (2015) or Dolores in *Westworld*—Indian cinema has rarely imagined a woman AI-superhero as an autonomous central protagonist. Indian films engaging AI themes—such as *Enthiran* and *Ra.One*—foreground technological spectacle but center male protagonists and masculinized technological authority. More recently, *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya* introduced *SIFRA*, a female-coded humanoid robot. However, despite her advanced capabilities, she remains narratively framed within romance and relational development rather than positioned as a superheroic figure with independent political or ethical agency.

This absence is not coincidental. It reflects entrenched patriarchal genre conventions, industrial structures, and cultural imaginaries that associate technological mastery and futurity with masculinity. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism, N. Katherine Hayles' posthumanism, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, and contemporary scholarship on AI bias, this paper argues that the scarcity of women AI-superheroes in Indian cinema reveals a broader ideological resistance to imagining women as technological sovereigns.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to critically examine the masculinization of technology in Indian cinema and to understand the ideological, industrial, and cultural factors behind the absence of women AI-superheroes in mainstream science fiction narratives. Specifically, the study seeks to analyze how technological power and artificial intelligence are symbolically coded as masculine, investigate representations in films such as *Enthiran*, *Ra.One*, and *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya*, and explore the contrast between mythological goddesses and the limited technological agency granted to women in contemporary cinema. It also aims to examine the role of patriarchal genre conventions, commercial imperatives, and industrial constraints in shaping narratives of AI and superheroism, while applying feminist and posthuman theories

(Haraway, Hayles, Butler) to interrogate gendered futurity. Ultimately, the study intends to highlight the possibilities for reimagining feminist technological futures in Indian science fiction, where women are envisioned not merely as companions or moral anchors, but as creators, controllers, and heroic embodiments of technological power.

Cyborg Feminism and the Missed Potential of the Female AI Hero

Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" proposes the cyborg as a hybrid figure that destabilizes binaries such as male/female and human/machine. Haraway argues that the cyborg offers feminist possibilities because it disrupts essentialist constructions of identity (Haraway 149). In theory, a female AI-superhero in Indian cinema could embody this radical hybridity—transcending biological determinism and patriarchal limitations.

However, Indian films have not fully realized this potential. In *Enthiran*, the humanoid robot Chitti evolves into a powerful autonomous being. Yet Chitti is male-coded, and the narrative frames technological transcendence as masculine ambition and excess. The possibility of a female cyborg destabilizing gender hierarchies remains unexplored.

Instead of radical cyborg identities, female AI characters in Indian cinema are often narratively domesticated. Their technological capabilities are subordinated to emotional arcs, particularly romance. This containment limits the feminist potential envisioned by Haraway.

Posthumanism and Gendered Technological Authority

N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, argues that posthuman identity challenges traditional notions of the autonomous liberal human subject (Hayles 2–3). The posthuman emphasizes information systems over embodied identity. Yet the cinematic posthuman in India remains gendered.

In *Ra.One*, digital avatars embody AI-driven power struggles. The conflict unfolds through male-coded technological mastery and superhero spectacle. Similarly, in *Enthiran*, the narrative centers on a male scientist whose creation becomes uncontrollable. The story frames technological ambition as a masculine domain.

By contrast, in *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya*, SIFRA is technologically advanced yet narratively defined by her romantic involvement. Her evolution centers on learning emotional

attachment rather than asserting ethical or political autonomy. Thus, the posthuman subject in Indian cinema is predominantly masculine.

Gender Performativity and Cinematic Containment

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity argues that gender is constructed through repeated social performances (Butler 25). Female AI characters in Indian films perform culturally sanctioned femininity—emotional sensitivity, relational dependency, and adaptability.

SIFRA's characterization exemplifies this pattern. Though superior in intelligence and adaptability, her narrative arc revolves around romantic integration into human society. She is not positioned as a protector, vigilante, or systemic challenger. Instead, her "superhuman" qualities are framed within domestic and relational contexts.

This narrative containment reflects what feminist scholars identify as the regulation of female agency. Women characters may display strength, but only within boundaries that preserve patriarchal equilibrium.

Masculinization of Technology in Indian Cinema

Research by Anushka Khadilkar and Apoorv Khuda Bukhsh highlights a persistent gender imbalance in Bollywood, where male characters dominate dialogue, narrative centrality, and plot-driving agency. This imbalance extends beyond romance and melodrama into science fiction and techno-futuristic narratives. In Indian cinema, technology is rarely neutral; it is symbolically associated with innovation, rationality, control, and futuristic progress—traits culturally coded as masculine within patriarchal frameworks. Rationality and scientific mastery are aligned with male intellect, while women are often confined to emotional or relational roles. Consequently, when films depict AI systems, robots, or technologically enhanced superheroes, these figures are overwhelmingly male.

Films such as Ra.One, Krrish, and Enthiran reinforce this pattern by situating technological creation, control, and heroism within male bodies and lineages. In these narratives, technology becomes an extension of male agency, and the superhero figure functions as a metaphor for amplified masculinity. Women, by contrast, appear as love interests, moral anchors, or narrative motivators rather than autonomous technological subjects. The absence of women AI-superheroes is therefore ideological rather than

incidental: it reflects a cultural imagination in which futurity and technological authority remain symbolically masculine, limiting the emergence of women as AI-powered agents of change

Mythological Power vs. Technological Power

Indian mythology presents some of the most powerful representations of feminine authority through goddesses such as Durga and Kali. These figures embody destruction, justice, fertility, and cosmic balance, often intervening when male gods are unable to restore order. As David Kinsley (1986) argues, Hindu goddesses simultaneously represent nurturing motherhood and terrifying autonomy, occupying a paradoxical yet revered space within religious imagination. The concept of *Shakti* positions feminine energy as the dynamic force of the universe, suggesting a theological elevation of womanhood. However, this empowerment remains symbolically contained within mythic and ritualistic frameworks. As Kathleen Erndl (1993) notes, goddess worship often coexists with patriarchal social structures, revealing a distinction between symbolic reverence and lived gender equality. Thus, while divine feminine power is culturally celebrated, it does not automatically translate into socio-political or technological authority.

In contrast, technological power—particularly in the age of artificial intelligence—operates within the frameworks of rationality, industrial modernity, and scientific control. Technology signifies authorship, design, and mastery over systems, qualities historically coded as masculine in modern societies (Wajcman, 1991). Feminist technoscience scholars argue that science and technology have long been constructed as male domains, reinforcing gendered hierarchies of expertise and authority (Haraway, 1985). Within Indian cinema, this cultural coding becomes evident in the scarcity of women portrayed as AI creators or technologically enhanced superheroes. The reluctance to imagine women as AI-sovereign figures suggests discomfort with associating femininity with rational-technological dominance rather than spiritual transcendence. In other words, feminine power is culturally sanctioned when divine, but destabilizing when technological. This divide exposes an ideological tension between mythological reverence and modern narratives of innovation, where technological sovereignty continues to be imagined as an extension of masculine control.

Industrial Constraints and Commercial Risk

Indian mainstream cinema operates within a highly market-driven ecosystem where box-office returns significantly shape creative decisions. High-budget genres such as science fiction and superhero films require substantial investment in visual effects, production design, marketing, and star salaries. Because science fiction remains a relatively niche genre in India compared to romance, family drama, or action melodrama, producers often minimize financial risk by casting established male superstars with proven commercial appeal. Films like *Ra.One* and *Krrish* were mounted on large budgets and anchored by bankable male leads whose star personas guaranteed audience turnout. In such cases, technological spectacle is intertwined with masculine stardom, reinforcing the perception that large-scale futuristic narratives require male-centered narratives to succeed commercially.

Introducing a woman AI-superhero within this framework would demand multiple layers of industrial risk. It would require high-budget visual effects comparable to global superhero standards, experimentation within a genre that already has limited domestic precedent, and a decisive shift away from romance-centric or supportive female roles. Additionally, it would necessitate the construction of strong female-led action frameworks—training sequences, combat choreography, and narrative arcs centered on technological mastery rather than emotional dependency. Mainstream Hindi cinema has historically hesitated to invest heavily in female-led action spectacles at the same scale as male-led franchises, partly due to entrenched assumptions about audience preferences and market viability. Consequently, the absence of female AI-superheroes is not merely ideological but also industrial. Commercial caution, risk-averse production models, and star-driven economics collectively reinforce a cycle in which technological futurism remains aligned with male protagonists, leaving little structural space for women to occupy AI-powered superhero roles.

Cultural Implications and the Politics of Futurity

Representation is never merely reflective; it is constitutive. Cinema does not simply mirror society—it shapes the boundaries of what audiences imagine as possible. When technology, artificial intelligence, and futuristic power are repeatedly embodied by male protagonists—as seen in films like *Ra.One* and *Krrish*—technological authority gradually becomes symbolically masculine. Over time, this repetition naturalizes the association between men and innovation, men and control, and men and futurity. The cultural imagination

begins to treat technological mastery as an extension of male identity, while women are positioned outside the domain of scientific authorship and digital sovereignty. Such patterns shape how audiences perceive who belongs in laboratories, coding cultures, and futuristic leadership roles.

The absence of women AI-superheroes, therefore, restricts feminist technological imaginaries. A female AI-superhero could redefine authority by presenting leadership grounded not only in strength but also in ethical responsibility. She could reshape posthuman identity by showing that artificial intelligence and cybernetic enhancement are not exclusively masculine spaces. Her presence would expand the idea of futuristic citizenship, positioning women as creators and regulators of technology rather than passive observers of progress. Her continued absence suggests that even in the digital age, patriarchal narrative structures still shape how the future is imagined.

Conclusion

The scarcity of women AI-superheroes in Indian cinema ultimately reveals a structural convergence of patriarchal genre conventions, commercial risk-avoidance, and deep-seated cultural anxieties about female technological authority. While Indian mythology venerates powerful goddesses as embodiments of cosmic strength, contemporary cinematic narratives remain hesitant to fuse femininity with scientific mastery and digital sovereignty. Films such as *Enthiran* and *Ra.One* consolidate technological power within masculine bodies, whereas *Teri Baaton Mein AisaUljha Jiya* contains female AI within romantic and domesticated frameworks rather than granting her autonomous heroic agency. Drawing upon the feminist posthuman insights of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Judith Butler, this analysis demonstrates that Indian cinema has yet to fully engage with the radical emancipatory potential of the cyborg as a figure that destabilizes gender binaries and redistributes power. Until filmmakers reimagine women not as emotional complements to technological systems but as their architects, regulators, and heroic embodiments, the futuristic imagination of Indian science fiction will remain tethered to masculine dominance rather than transformative gender equality.

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