

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking
Double-blind, Peer-reviewed and Open Access Journal in English



Vol. 6 Issue 1 Winter Edition 2026 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 17-30

www.literaryhrm.org
www.cavemarkpublications.com



A Feminist Analysis of Ardab Mutiyaran

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Research Article

Keywords: Punjabi cinema, Ardab Mutiyaran, female gaze, women's agency, patriarchy

Article History

Received:
December 2, 2025

Revised:
December 10, 2025

Accepted:
January 1, 2026



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPLJLH)



Abstract

Aim: This paper aims to examine Ardab Mutiyaran (2019) through feminist film theory to explore how Punjabi popular cinema negotiates women's agency and the possibility of a female gaze within the constraints of the masala genre.

Methodology and Approaches: The study adopts a qualitative, text-based analytical approach grounded in feminist film theory. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and postfeminist critiques by Angela McRobbie and Mary Ann Doane, the paper conducts a close reading of the film's narrative structure, visual style, characterisation, and use of humour.

Outcome: The analysis demonstrates that while the film foregrounds assertive female protagonists and gestures toward women-centred storytelling, these moments of empowerment remain structurally limited by comedic framing, romantic resolution, and domestic reconciliation.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The paper concludes that Ardab Mutiyaran functions as a transitional text that signals change without fully dismantling patriarchal narrative conventions. Future research may examine similar trends across contemporary Punjabi cinema to assess whether symbolic visibility translates into sustained narrative agency for women.

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Punjabi cinema occupies a distinctive position within India's regional film landscape. It blends commercial spectacle, folk memory, and contemporary social anxieties, yet its narrative structures remain closely tied to patriarchal ideals. It reflects the region's cultural imagination. Over the decades, the industry has diversified in genre and audience reach but women continue to appear within a narrow spectrum of roles that emphasise domestic virtue, emotional restraint, or ornamental presence. Films may gesture toward assertive female characters, but these gestures often remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Ardab Mutiyaran (2019) is apparently a departure from these norms. The film opens with unusual confidence. It does not place women not on the margins but at the centre of workplace conflict, household negotiations. Babbu and Shruti, its two protagonists, are framed as competent, forceful, and unapologetically present. Such qualities that Punjabi mainstream cinema seldom affords its women. Yet the film's apparent boldness is complicated by the mechanics of the masala genre, which relies on humour, romance, and domestic reconciliation to maintain broad commercial appeal. This paper evaluates *Ardab Mutiyaran* through the lens of feminist film theory, particularly debates surrounding the male gaze, the possibility of a female gaze, and the representational logics of postfeminism. By placing the film within the broader ecosystem of Punjabi cultural norms and industrial constraints, the argument traces how moments of empowerment are alternately emphasised and neutralised. The aim is not simply to critique the film but to understand how regional cinema negotiates the tension between market imperatives and the growing demand for women-centred narratives. In doing so, the analysis highlights both the film's contributions and its limitations, situating *Ardab Mutiyaran* within the ongoing conversation about gender, spectatorship, and agency in Punjabi cinema.

Historical Context of Punjabi Cinema: Punjabi cinema began its journey in pre-Partition Lahore, where early titles such as *Daughter of Today* (1924) and *Heer Ranjha* (1932). These films helped establish a regional film culture long before the industry found a stable home in post-1947 India. After Partition, production shifted eastward and struggled for several years to rebuild its creative and technical infrastructure. Films like *Chaman* (1948) were part of this slow recalibration, marking the beginning of a new phase rather than a continuation of

what Lahore had set in motion. By the 1980s, the industry had consolidated a very specific screen identity: the rise of the “Jatt hero.” This figure, rooted in rural masculinity, dominated narratives through physical strength, emotional restraint, and a sense of inherited authority. His prominence shaped not only the kinds of stories being told but also the roles that women were allowed to inhabit. The early 2000s introduced another major shift. With films such as *Jee Aayan Nu* (2002), Punjabi cinema turned toward the diaspora. Themes of migration, belonging, and global Punjabi identity were central. The past decade, often described as the “New Age” phase of Punjabi cinema, has pushed the industry toward social-issue dramas, nostalgia-driven rural aesthetics, and a broader range of narrative settings. Despite these stylistic, thematic, and commercial transformations, no substantial changes in the representation of gender occurred. As Harneet Kaur observes, even the most innovative Punjabi films continue to operate within a framework that associates femininity with modesty, emotional restraint, and domestic virtue (Kaur 259). Women may now occupy a wider variety of roles, but the worldview shaping those roles remains anchored in patriarchal expectations. Female characters are often granted visibility, but not depth; presence, but rarely agency. This lingering divide forms the backdrop against which *Ardab Mutiyaran* must be studied.

Female Representation and Feminist Themes in Punjabi Cinema: Across much of its history, Punjabi cinema has sustained what Raewyn Connell describes as hegemonic masculinity. It is an arrangement that treats male authority as natural and assigns women supportive or ornamental positions. Harneet Kaur’s research shows how deeply this framework shapes the industry: for decades, films have revolved around male heroes whose decisions, conflicts, and desires form the spine of the narrative, while women are written into roles that rarely exceed idealised love interests or dutiful mothers (Kaur 264).

This division is not accidental. It is tied to a cultural logic that associates femininity with restraint and emotional compliance. Kaur notes that many heroines are styled to fit a very specific visual expectation—fair-skinned, soft-spoken, and largely reactive—suggesting that the camera’s interest lies less in their subjectivity than in their appearance (265). Their narrative tasks often involve maintaining domestic balance, forgiving the male protagonist, or serving

as an emblem of traditional values. Even when the story gives a woman more visibility, it rarely grants her narrative agency. These representational patterns mirror the gendered inequalities of the industry itself. Male singer-actors such as Gurdas Mann, Harbhajan Mann, Amrinder Gill, Diljit Dosanjh, Gippy Grewal, Ammy Virk, the late Sidhu Moosewala have moved into lead film roles with relative ease. Their female counterparts seldom receive comparable opportunities, even when they possess substantial cultural presence. They find it difficult to carry their musical fame into cinema. The disparity in remuneration shows the same logic. When *Badla Jatti Da* (1991) became a hit, Sunita Dhir, despite being the central figure, earned significantly less than the men attached to the project (Kaur 266).

Despite this landscape, a set of films has attempted to center women's experiences. *Badla Jatti Da* was an early outlier: imperfect in its politics, yet bold in allowing a woman to drive the narrative. More recent titles like *Channo* (2016), *Gelo* (2016), *Daana Paani* (2018), *Needhi Singh* (2017), and *Gudiyaan Patole* (2019) treat women not as symbolic placeholders but as individuals negotiating structural pressures. However, these films often temper their feminist impulses through romance, humour, or sentimental framing. The challenge to patriarchy is present, but carefully moderated to avoid alienating mainstream audiences. The pattern Kaur identifies as characteristic of the industry's cautious engagement with gender (266).

Saavi (2017) offers one of the clearest confrontations with rural patriarchy. The film exposes the violence of the *vatta-satta* bride-exchange system. Its modest commercial performance, however, suggests that films which foreground structural misogyny face resistance in the market. Similarly, *Maa* (2022) reworks a familiar archetype, the Punjabi mother, by presenting a figure who is decisive rather than self-sacrificing. Yet even here, the broader cinematic culture tends to treat such departures as exceptions rather than a new norm. Behind the scenes, women remain few. Ish Amitoj Kaur's *Chhevan Dariya* (2010) remains notable as the first Punjabi film to be written, directed, and produced by a woman. The lack of women in directing and production roles continues to shape the kinds of stories that are told and the manner in which they appear on screen. Although actresses such as Neeru Bajwa, Sonam Bajwa, and

Sargun Mehta dominate popular imagination, they often do so within boundaries set by long-standing gender conventions. Character actors such as Nirmal Rishi and Anita Devgan add depth to supporting roles, yet these parts tend to reinforce domestic archetypes rather than expand the representational field (Kaur, Paramjit 166). Taken together, this history reveals a cinema that has certainly evolved in theme and scale but remains attached to an older gender order. Women are more visible than ever before, yet visibility has not translated into narrative or structural parity. This is the environment in which *Ardab Mutiyaran* attempts to stage female agency. There are constraints it faces are embedded not only in the film's plot, but in the industrial logic that surrounds it.

Theoretical Framework: Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) remains a point of departure for any discussion of spectatorship. Her central claim is straightforward: mainstream film builds its grammar around a masculine way of looking. Men advance the story. They act and decide; women merely appear so that they can be seen. Mulvey links this asymmetry to a deeper cultural anxiety about female visibility, arguing that cinema contains this anxiety through two recurring strategies—voyeuristic scrutiny and aesthetic idealisation—both of which stabilize patriarchal order rather than disrupt it. Later feminist critics have revisited these claims, sometimes extending them, sometimes questioning their limits. Mary Ann Doane, for instance, draws attention to the female spectator's unstable position in a system designed around masculine desire. Her work underscores the gap between visibility and subjectivity: women may occupy the frame, but the terms of their appearance often deny them an interior life. This tension becomes crucial for understanding any attempt to imagine a "female gaze."

The phrase "female gaze," while used in different ways across criticism, generally refers to forms of representation that allow women interiority, agency, and emotional depth. These qualities resist being flattened into surface-level spectacle. It does not simply reverse Mulvey's formulation; rather, it asks what a cinematic mode shaped by women's perspectives, desires, and vulnerabilities might look like. Feminist scholars argue for a shift in how narrative attention is distributed, how the camera lingers, and what kinds of emotional or ethical spaces female characters are permitted to inhabit. The industrial and cultural context of

Punjabi cinema in which *Ardab Mutiyaran* is situated operates according to its own conventions. It mirrors the patterns Mulvey and Doane identify. Films frequently divide their female characters into two predictable types. One embodies idealised domestic femininity: patient, decorous, morally reassuring. The other is a more contemporary figure associated with fashion, urban modernity, or music-video aesthetics. In Punjabi cinema, this second type is not necessarily sexualised in explicit terms, but she is framed as decorative, as someone who contributes to the scene's visual energy rather than its narrative direction. Song sequences often amplify this contrast, suspending story in favour of spectacle.

It is within this context that *Ardab Mutiyaran* positions itself as a film that might shift the visual and narrative balance. Babbu and Shruti are placed in roles that appear to resist the familiar alignment of masculinity with action and femininity with display. Whether the film succeeds in sustaining this resistance is another question. Since it belongs to the masala genre which is a blend of comedy, romance, melodrama, and musical interludes, it must also work within a genre that favours emotional broadness over psychological depth. The present analysis therefore draws on Mulvey and Doane, while also incorporating insights from Angela McRobbie, whose work on postfeminist representation helps clarify why forms of empowerment in commercial cinema often appear assertive yet remain conservative in outcome. Additionally, the study engages Nivedita Menon's critique of Indian feminist discourse to understand how regional cinemas reproduce certain exclusions based on caste, class, and community. Together, these frameworks allow for a reading of *Ardab Mutiyaran* that situates its gender politics. It focuses not only in the narrative, but also in the ways the camera sees and how the genre shapes expectations. It enables us to examine how the industry negotiates what forms of female agency it is prepared to permit.

Narrative Structure and the Female Gaze: *Ardab Mutiyaran* begins by placing its two female protagonists in spaces usually reserved men within Punjabi popular cinema. Babbu works as a recovery agent a job associated with physical confrontation and the ability to negotiate or overpower male debtors. Shruti heads finance department in Chaddha Finance, a position that gives her institutional command and sets her apart from the ornamental roles to which women in

regional cinema are often relegated. These opening movements unsettle the familiar pairing of active masculinity and passive femininity. They also hint at a narrative that might sustain a female-centered point of view. However, this initial departure is short-lived. As the story develops, the film turns away from professional space and channels its energy toward domestic comedy. Marriage reorganizes both characters' trajectories: Babbu's conflicts with Rinku's family and Shruti's adjustments with Vicky serve as the new narrative centre. Their professional authority, emphasized in the first act, is gradually reframed as a temporary phase rather than a stable identity. The shift is not simply tonal rather it redirects the characters from public influence to household negotiation, where assertiveness is carefully contained.

Angela McRobbie's notion of the "postfeminist masquerade" helps clarify this transition. McRobbie describes how contemporary media often presents women as confident and outspoken, but ultimately steers them back into normative heterosexual structures that reassert male-centred stability. Babbu and Shruti fit this pattern. Their early displays of independence remain visible, yet the story positions marriage as the domain where their agency must be moderated and interpreted through relational harmony. Their authority becomes negotiable rather than transformative. This redirection is echoed in the film's conclusion. What begins as a challenge to gendered labour hierarchies ends with both women absorbed into domestic roles that restore conventional order. The resolution aligns with Laura Mulvey's observation that classical narrative cinema often reabsorbs disruptive female figures into structures that reaffirm male possession or patriarchal coherence. The closing scenes do not punish Babbu or Shruti, but they do neutralise the destabilising potential the characters initially represent. Thus, the film offers a narrative arc that begins with gestures of resistance but finally returns to conservatism. The structure does not allow a sustained female gaze to develop. Instead, it oscillates between brief assertions of autonomy and a broader commitment to the genre expectations of Punjabi masala cinema where romance, humour, and family reconciliation reliably guide the story toward closure. The result is a narrative that acknowledges the possibility of female agency but stops short of letting it fundamentally reshape the cinematic world it depicts.

Visual Style: Pragmatism and the Limits of Feminist Aesthetics: The visual design of *Ardab Mutiyaran* appears to distance itself from the conventions that usually organise the male gaze in Punjabi cinema. The film deliberately avoids the aesthetic of glamour often imposed on female characters. Babbu is dressed in loose shirts, jackets, and minimal makeup, while Shruti appears in sharply tailored business suits and understated sarees. These choices shift the viewer's attention from feminine display to professional competence. Such a departure signals an intention to resist the ornamental framing that has long shaped the representation of women in the regional industry.

Ruchi Ravi Shewade's analysis of the Bollywood item number highlights the visual culture the film seems keen to avoid. She notes that such sequences centre on a figure whose confidence is only permitted within a tightly controlled spectacle that reinforces male pleasure rather than challenging it. *Ardab Mutiyaran*'s promotional song "Jatti Jeone Morh Wargi" is built on an entirely different logic. Instead of isolating the heroine as a decorative interlude, the sequence grows organically out of Babbu's personality. The song depicts her confrontational energy that defines her early characterisation. The song refers to Jeona Morh a folkloric rebel who is remembered for defiance and fearlessness. The figure of Jeona Morh aligns Babbu with a cultural vocabulary of resistance rather than desirability. The choreography and framing underline her sharpness and volatility, not her sexual appeal. Yet the film does not maintain this resistance consistently. Much of its cinematography favours surface-level spectacle over sustained attention to interiority. This habit limits the emergence of a genuine female gaze, one capable of representing women as subjects with emotional depth rather than as figures who must always remain visually attractive. A key example is the confrontation between Babbu and Shruti. The scene initially appears poised to explore female rivalry or solidarity within a patriarchal environment, but it devolves into slapstick. The turn to humour undercuts the seriousness of the moment and aligns with Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's argument that comedy often serves to neutralise the disruptive force of assertive female figures. Through laughter, the threat posed by "unruly women" becomes manageable.

The film adopts a similar approach in its depiction of matriarchal authority. Characters like Sudesh, or Rinku's sisters-in-law, hold power within

their domestic spheres. The narrative frames this authority as exaggerated, eccentric, or comical. Their dominance is treated as an aberration rather than a legitimate form of social agency. The humour surrounding these women reinforces a familiar cinematic pattern: female power is tolerated only when it can be made harmless. In the end, *Ardab Mutiyaran* occupies an ambivalent visual terrain. It resists certain patriarchal aesthetics but does not fully break from them. The film avoids overt objectification, yet it does not construct a sustained alternative that centres female subjectivity or emotional complexity. Instead, it navigates a middle path shaped by commercial pragmatism. The result is a visual style that gestures toward feminist re-orientation but ultimately remains bound by the conventions of the masala genre and the expectations of its mainstream audience.

Character Agency: Babbu's role as a recovery agent places her in a position rarely granted to women in Punjabi cinema, where female characters seldom occupy professions associated with physical confrontation or public authority. Her brusque manner and ease within male-dominated spaces mark a clear departure from the ornamental femininity. In these early scenes, she participates in the action rather than serving as its visual endpoint. With this role she unsettles the gendered division that underlies much of mainstream cinematic narration. However, this apparent autonomy quickly reveals its limits. Babbu's character is built almost entirely through outward behaviour. She displays defiance and confronts whosoever stands in her ways. The film grants little access to her inner life. Her motivations are presented through action rather than reflection. The viewer is not offered sustained insight into her fears, contradictions typical of a real life subject. This absence of interiority is consistent with a broader pattern Mary Ann Doane identifies in classical cinema, where female characters are made visible but are seldom allowed the subjective depth afforded to men. Babbu's forcefulness becomes more a matter of performance than of self-knowledge. Her character is shaped by the demands of the plot rather than by an evolving inner consciousness.

Shruti is introduced with a different kind of authority. As the head of finance department of Chaddha Finance, she embodies institutional power and professional competence—an image that initially challenges the passive

positioning of women in Mulvey's framework. Yet her trajectory soon follows a familiar route. The narrative reframes her authority as overbearing, and her professional decisiveness is gradually rewritten as emotional excess and comic. Marriage becomes the mechanism through which this excess is corrected. The film softens her presence. Her ambition is recoded as imbalance and domesticity as a stabilising solution. Rosalind Gill's notion of the postfeminist sensibility helps clarify this shift. Empowerment is celebrated, but only when it aligns with traditional femininity and does not disrupt established hierarchies. Vicky's character reinforces this logic. His exaggerated deference to Shruti is consistently played for humour, suggesting that female authority particularly authority over men belongs more to the realm of the comic than to the social. By presenting role reversal as absurd rather than viable, the film implies that normative gender arrangements remain the proper, natural order. Shruti's early strength is thus not taken seriously; it is made safe through ridicule.

Together, these character arcs reveal a pattern in which female agency is acknowledged but kept within narrow bounds. The film permits moments of challenge but ultimately redirects its protagonists toward domestic harmony. Conflict is softened, authority is domesticated. Both women's assertiveness becomes a temporary posture rather than a stable mode of being. In this sense, *Ardab Mutiyan* aligns with broader trends in regional cinema, where gestures toward empowerment coexist with narrative strategies that reaffirm patriarchal coherence. The limitations of these portrayals become clearer through an intersectional lens. The film centres relatively privileged, urban women, leaving unaddressed the ways caste, class, and rural marginalisation shape gendered experience in Punjab. As Nivedita Menon has shown, Indian feminism has often foregrounded upper-caste, metropolitan subjectivities, and *Ardab Mutiyan* reproduces this emphasis. Its feminist gestures, therefore, operate within a narrow social frame, leaving more deeply embedded structural hierarchies untouched. In this respect, the film stands as a transitional work. It marks a willingness to depict female characters who occupy public and professional spaces. At the same time, it remains bound by the narrative and cultural pressures that pull them back toward domestic containment. The film gestures toward a more expansive vision of

women's agency, but it does not fully realise it. The film opts for easy resolutions that leave the patriarchal order largely intact.

Cultural Context and Industry Constraints: The narrative shape of *Ardab Mutiyaran* cannot be separated from the cultural context in which Punjabi cinema operates. Gender norms in Punjab continue to be structured by ideas of izzat and clearly demarcated domestic roles. Babbu's assertiveness derives much of its narrative force from this background. Her refusal to follow the expected codes of deference, whether in the workplace or in the joint family, registers as a disruption of everyday social order. Yet this disruption is short-lived. The narrative gradually steers her back into a domestic framework, where her energy is redirected toward household negotiations. This repositioning reflects what Radha S. Hegde describes as "gendered modernity"—a mode in which women may enter public or semi-public roles, but their visibility is tolerated only when it ultimately reinforces the moral boundaries of the community. Babbu's public authority acquires legitimacy only once it is folded into marriage. The household becomes the final and acceptable site for her strength. The film thus allows a measure of deviation, but reinscribes the expectation that women's empowerment. In patriarchal order, the women's empowerment must serve familial stability rather than challenge it.

Industry conditions further shape this containment. Punjabi cinema remains tied to genres that promise immediate commercial returns. Genres such as romantic comedy, family drama, and music-driven entertainment prove to be successful. These forms do not easily accommodate extended reflection, interior monologue, or political critique. The reliance on slapstick humour and competitive banter in *Ardab Mutiyaran* reflects an industrial strategy rather than a purely artistic choice. Filmmakers working in this context must balance novelty with recognisable structures in order to ensure financial success.

Even within these constraints, *Ardab Mutiyaran* signals modest change. Its promotional materials foregrounded female protagonists. Such a marketing choice would have been unlikely a few decades earlier. The film's success indicates a growing willingness among audiences to engage with stories centred on women, even if these stories remain narratively cautious. Symbolic visibility is not equivalent to structural transformation, but it does suggest an expanding

imaginative horizon within the industry. The challenge is how to convert symbolic prominence into meaningful change. For Punjabi cinema to evolve beyond token gestures, it must cultivate narrative forms that treat female perspectives as foundational. Structural change would require shifts in genre conventions, investment priorities, and the industry's understanding of its audience. *Ardab Mutiyaran* marks a step in that direction, but its compromises also reveal the distance yet to be covered.

Ardab Mutiyaran highlights the uneasy place that women occupy in contemporary Punjabi cinema. The film opens with scenes that grant its protagonists forms of authority rarely afforded to women in regional commercial narratives. Babbu and Shruti appear capable of disrupting familiar gender arrangements. Yet the film is unable or unwilling to carry this challenge to its logical conclusion. As the plot advances, humour and family reconciliation gradually draw the narrative back to a recognisable patriarchal centre. The limits of the film's engagement with the female gaze become clear in this shift. Early moments hint at a perspective shaped by women's experiences and subjectivities, but these possibilities are absorbed into a conventional romantic and domestic resolution. What remains is a form of empowerment that is visible but circumscribed. The film gestures towards female autonomy but does not sustain an interior or structural critique of the norms that constrain it. Even so, the significance of *Ardab Mutiyaran* should not be dismissed. Its commercial success indicates that Punjabi audiences are increasingly receptive to narratives centred on women, even if such narratives are still framed cautiously. The film occupies a transitional position. It neither overturns existing conventions nor simply reproduces them without friction. Instead, it creates moments of rupture that reveal where change may be possible, even if those moments are subsequently contained. For Punjabi cinema to move beyond symbolic gestures, it must confront the industry's aesthetic and cultural structures that limit the representation of women's agency. Films will need to experiment with narrative forms that allow female subjectivity to unfold without being redirected toward domestic closure.

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Media, vol. 30, no. 1, 2022, pp. 119–138. Taylor & Francis Online,
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