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Breaking the Frame: Challenging Beauty Norms and Redefining Resilience in the Film *Double XL*

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Abstract

Aim: The film *Double XL*, challenges traditional beauty ideals by promoting body positivity and inclusivity. In this paper, feminist literary theory, particularly postfeminism, will be used to analyse how the film reshapes identity narratives and fosters self-confidence. By examining character development, themes, and cinematography, the paper will highlight the impact of film on representation, empowerment, and body image, depicting its role in changing cultural attitudes toward inclusivity and body positivity.

Methodology and Approach: The authors, while writing the paper, have consulted the primary sources, such as the film *Double XL* and secondary sources in this paper as part of their research. The researchers have applied the feminist approach to cinema to examine gendered beauty standards and societal expectations.

Outcome: Through their study, the researchers have found that body standards play an important role in Indian society. However, the director, instead of giving in to fixed standards, takes a transformative stance by making the heroines believe in themselves and love themselves as they are.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The paper examines societal prejudices towards larger body sizes through the experiences of female protagonists Sazia Khanna and Rajshree Trivedi, emphasising resilience and self-acceptance as essential components of empowerment. The movie tells people to be confident in themselves beyond how they look by rejecting narrow beauty standards.

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Social media has become a powerful force in the 21st century that shapes how people think about gender, beauty, and self-worth. Hindi cinema continues to be a powerful cultural force, along with digital culture, in reflecting and shaping social norms at the same time. While progress has been made in diversifying representations, Indian films—especially mainstream Bollywood—often promote outdated ideas about gender and looks. Women, in particular, continue to be objectified, and their worth is often judged by how attractive they are rather than by their intelligence, ambition, or emotional depth.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation emphasises that media texts serve not merely as passive reflections of reality but as active constructs that significantly influence meaning within a cultural context. The media possesses the power to organise and present various societal elements, including gender, age, ethnicity, regional identity, and social issues, which can effectively shape perspectives and beliefs (Hall, 15–16). In the context of India, cinema stands out as a vital medium for cultural expression, and its representations of women's bodies carry profound ideological implications.

While there has been notable progress in feminist discourse and the growth of independent cinema, it remains apparent that stereotypical and limited representations of women continue to exist, especially within Bollywood. The prevailing image of the ideal woman is often associated with being slender, fair-skinned, and exhibiting hyper-feminine traits. Unfortunately, these portrayals can perpetuate dominant beauty standards that reflect patriarchal and capitalist influences. These standards may inadvertently marginalise many women and contribute to psychological challenges, fostering feelings of insecurity and self-scrutiny. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” underscores the notion that femininity is not an inherent trait but a constructed identity. This construction is largely influenced by media and popular culture, which often dictate how women are expected to present themselves. Ultimately, it is crucial to recognise the complexities involved and advocate for a broader representation that embraces the diversity of women's experiences and identities.

Body image, especially for women, is not just how they see themselves; it is also shaped by larger cultural and social stories. As a powerful way to tell stories, films are very important in making and strengthening these kinds of stories. It affects how people see themselves and others, as well as how they take in ideas about beauty and self-acceptance. In this context, the marginalisation of plus-sized female bodies in Indian films reflects larger societal discomfort with bodily diversity and non-conformity.

Historically, Indian cinema has either ignored plus-sized women or used them as comedic devices, stripping them of depth and desire. As the theorist Anne Hole (2003) notes, overweight women in the media are frequently “de-feminised” or presented as grotesque. Portrayal of plus-sized characters like Manorama (*Ek Phool Do Mali*), Preeti Ganguli (*Khatta Meetha*), and Guddi Maruti (*Shola Aur Shabnam*) often served as caricatures rather than as complex individuals. Their fatness was either a punchline or a marker of difference, used as a lens through which larger societal critiques were made.

In recent decades, films like *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* may attempt to address body issues but often return to the trope of physical transformation as a path to acceptance and love. In contrast, *Double XL* (2022) offers a necessary counter-narrative. *Double XL* centres on Rajshri (Huma Qureshi) and Saira (Sonakshi Sinha), two plus-size women from different backgrounds. Rajshri, a “healthy” young woman in Meerut, aspires to become a sports presenter despite her mother’s insistence on marriage. Saira, a Delhi-based designer, dreams of launching a plus-size fashion line but endures fat-shaming in her love life. Fate brings them together in London, where they share their struggles and decide to pursue their ambitions (sports television and fashion, respectively) against the odds. In the process, they forge a deep friendship – “celebrate female friendship” – and gradually assert that beauty is not size-bound. This paper analyses how *Double XL* contests conventional cinematic portrayals by emphasising the experiences of two plus-sized women who confront and resist the stigma linked to their bodies. In mainstream Hindi cinema, this movie is a rare example of plus-sized main characters who are shown with depth, agency, and complexity. It goes

against the common idea that changing your body will make you more accepted in society and instead supports self-acceptance and empowerment.

The plot of the movie *Double XL* lies between two women, Rajshree Trivedi, portrayed by Huma Qureshi, and Saira Khanna by Sonakshi Sinha. “Duniya ko ya toh sapne ke size se aitraaz hota hai, ya dekhne waale ke” (*Double XL*) says a voice-over in the trailer of the film *Double XL*. The word size is uttered about half a dozen times in the trailer, not an unexpected cliché from a film that seeks to explore the inner world of women who fit into the large aspect of the size spectrum. The alternative perspectives about what types of bodies are valued, capable, and attractive are widely available online through blogs, discussion forums, and social media platforms.

The very title of the movie *Double XL* is engaging. Double XL is the last size of any clothing, and the last option for plus-size women. In the contemporary digital era, where each activity of a person is uploaded by them online via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., hoping for likes, comments, and a wide following, plus-size people feel themselves unacceptable in the standards set by society. When an obese person posts something online, he or she is mocked. They are advised to become fit from the fat. As the title asserts, the movie revolves around the lives of two plus-size women, Rajshree Trivedi and Saira Khanna, and their struggle to fulfil their desire. At the very beginning of the movie, Rajshree dreams of dancing with one of the famous players of the Indian cricket team, Shikhar Dhawan, and she expresses her desire to the person, set as a match by her mother. She shows one of her recorded videos to the person about her talent. However, the person judges her on her appearance and rejects Rajshree, discouraging her by saying, “Kuch log aukad se bade sapne dekhte hain,” which reflects a cynical view often directed at those who dare to dream beyond their current circumstances. The line captures society's tendency to discourage people, especially women, with ambitions to challenge societal expectations. It shows the limitations imposed on individuals based on appearance, background, or social standing, emphasising the judgment and scepticism that women like Rajshree often face. Similarly, Saira Khanna, being a plus-size model, is doubted by customers over her talent. They make remarks like “Khud to moti kisi design me

fit nhi aati ye kya fashion designer banegi” (*Double XL* 0:49:59). It highlights prejudice and body shaming, reflecting the unfair societal expectations that only people with ideal body types should engage in certain professions, such as fashion designing. Both women are constantly giving their best in their fields to achieve their dreams. However, despite their talent or ambitions, both of them face rejection and discrimination due to their appearance.

In contemporary society, women are usually viewed as little more than objects of desire, and their worth is based more on how they seem rather than on any innate qualities. As Michel Foucault, in his concept of biopower (*Discipline and Punish*, 1977), illustrates how companies pathologise obesity to impose compliance. Foucault notes, “The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it” (25). *Double XL* reveals how body politics exist in the media, fashion industry, etc. While Saira finds it hard to get a producer and promoter for her ideas, Rajshree is said to be unfit for the sports industry and is rejected from the interview by the director without giving her any chance to show her ability.

Women who deviate from the thin body norm suffer not only on the desirability and career front but also in their personal lives. They often experience tougher access to getting a husband and children. Saira is ditched by her model boyfriend for a skinny girl. She realises that he was with her only for her financial background. Similarly, Rajshree’s personal life with her mother seems to be deteriorating due to her rejection in the marriage market. Bartky writes, “The bodies of women have been subjected to particularly intense scrutiny and regulations as have their minds and souls. Women have been told implicitly and explicitly what to wear, what to eat, how to sit, how to stand, how to walk, how to talk, and how to think” (56). And these subjections are promoted through the TV ads, item numbers, as well as the slim figures of the lead actresses. These representations have promoted the idea of fat as ugly, unhygienic, unwanted, and unhealthy beings.

In the movie *Double XL*, Saira and Rajshree do not give in to societal expectations. On the contrary, they love themselves as they are. After the rejection when Rajshree was howling and crying in the washroom, she met Saira

Khanna, who also caught her boyfriend cheating for some roundabout reasons. She consoled her and said, “Do you think your life is over just because your sizes are bigger” (0:40:15). These lines deliver a crucial moment challenging the societal norms and encouraging Rajshree to follow her dream regardless of her body size and to recognise her value beyond their physical appearance. Saira became Rajshree's ticket to London, where she could face the CEO of the Sports channel and establish her value.

When Saira is upset, the camera teases us with a succession of empty food boxes before cutting to her face, which is stuffed with kebab rolls. The symbol of chips, burgers, shakes, and other treats is used to make fun of the way that society frequently equates being overweight with leading an extravagant lifestyle. It challenges the media's and society's hypocritical assessment of the bodies of people while praising unhealthy behaviours. The employment of stand-up comedy as a communication tool marks a turning point when Saira and Rajshree arrive in London and enter their “screw society” phase. They utilise humour to analyse, recover, and reframe their life rather than having traditional discussions about their issues. By embracing comedy over serious dialogue, the movie subverts expectations, presenting its defiance in an accessible and relatable manner.

In London, Rajshree gets the opportunity to interview Kapil Dev, the *Sher-e-Punjab* of Indian cricket history, with the help of Zorawar, their producer. However, when Kapil Dev sees the set and Rajshree, he tells them that he can only give five minutes, but Rajshree's talent makes him enjoy the session, and he gives ample time to them. This cameo scene of Kapil Dev in the movie represents how appearance plays a key factor in deciding one's ability, but the later statement by Kapil Dev is an achievement for Rajshree, making her more confident. In London, Saira gets the idea of how a typical woman looks and changes her idea by crafting her motto as “design for all sizes”. When Rajshree and Saira return to India, they are the changed beings. They have accepted themselves as they are and achieved the careers as they had wanted, Rajshree being the sports anchor and Saira getting her brand name. The first and last scene of the movie highlights the theme of the struggle for self-acceptance. Rajshree, who was made fun of for her career choice and body size, was now signing

twenty-five lakh rupees. Saira Khanna, who at the beginning of the movie had argued with the salesman about the plus-size clothes, was now opening her brand where every size would visit confidently. Satramm Ramani, balancing the humour with the plot, tries to reshape the body narrative in Indian cinema through the journey of the protagonists.

In Indian society, body image plays a significant role, with common ideas being that boys should be muscular and girls should be tall and slim. Sadly, women are more likely to feel the effects of body shaming because these attitudes are deeply ingrained in cultural views on weight, skin tone, and general appearance. This makes things difficult for a lot of people, especially women, who may end up with serious problems like depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and eating disorders. Bollywood's approach to body positivity and inclusivity has changed significantly with the release of *Double XL*. The film shows how society's values and the nation's collective consciousness are changing. For fighting the adverse effects of body shaming, it's important to promote self-acceptance and body positivity. Satram Ramani, through the film *Double XL*, encourages self-love and celebrates that different body types can have a big impact on changing the way people think about culture. Instead of setting impossible beauty standards, creating an environment that encourages people to accept their own unique traits, the film helps society become more welcoming and helpful for everyone.

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