

Representation Redefined: The Tawaif in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas and Heeramandi

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ABSTRACT

Indian cinema has undergone a significant transformation in its form and ideology under the sway of globalization, digitalization, and feminist discourse. In recent years, amid the growing prominence of the OTT platforms, narrative freedom has expanded, enabling filmmakers to reimagine marginalized identities beyond Bollywood's melodramatic conventions. In this evolving mediascape, the tawaif- once an iconic cultural figure who were later reduced to a tragic courtesan- serves as a critical lens for examining the shifting grammar of women's representation. This paper analyses Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas (2002) and Heeramandi (2024) through Stuart Hall's theory of representation to explore the paradigmatic shifts in narrative, visuality, and performance. This study further identifies a transformation of the tawaif from objectified and tragic figures in Devdas to empowered and multi-layered characters in Heeramandi. Ultimately, it contributes to media representation debates by demonstrating how evolving platforms reshape cultural narratives and recuperate marginalized voices.

KEYWORDS

Tawaifs, Cultural Representation, Marginalized Identities, OTT Platforms, Indian Media

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1. Introduction

The tawaifs were celebrated virtuosos of pre-colonial and colonial India, renowned for their mastery of music, dance, poetry, and refined etiquette. Far from being mere entertainers, they functioned as cultural custodians and patrons of the arts, preserving Hindustani classical music, particularly Kathak, and Urdu poetry. Emerging in the Mughal era, the tawaifs held a distinctive position within the social and political elite- often serving as educators, arbiters of taste, and even political advisors. Figures such as Begum Hazrat Mahal and Azizan Bai exemplify how art, femininity, and political agency could converge in the tawaif's identity. However, British colonial morality recast their image through a Victorian lens, collapsing the distinction between courtesanship and prostitution and erasing their artistic legitimacy. This colonial distortion persisted into the postcolonial period through popular cinema, where the tawaif became a site of

moral anxiety and aesthetic fascination. Films such as Pakeezah (Amrohi, 1972) and Umrao Jaan (Ali, 1981; Dutta, 2006) visually glorified tawaifs yet reduced them to tragic figures trapped in cycles of love, loss, and social ostracism. These portrayals, while artistically rich, reinforced patriarchal discourses that

equate female virtue with sacrifice and submission, obscuring the tawaif's historical role as both a patron

of art and an agent of resistance. In recent years, there has been a renewed effort to recover the tawaif's voice within academic and cinematic narratives. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002) and *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* (2024) provide a compelling continuum through which the changing portrayal of tawaifs can be traced. While *Devdas* situates them within patriarchal melodrama as outcast seekers of unattainable love, *Heeramandi* reimagines them as politically conscious and self-assertive women. This shift from classical cinema to digital streaming is not merely technological but ideological-allowing for greater narrative depth and more inclusive portrayals that challenge historical silencing.

This transformation can be understood through Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which posits that media actively construct meaning through language, imagery, and ideology rather than reflecting reality. His encoding/decoding model (1980) reveals how audiences negotiate meanings-where *Devdas* invites dominant readings of noble suffering, *Heeramandi* opens space for oppositional readings that resist patriarchal fixity. Similarly, Gill (2006) argues that media representation encodes hierarchies of gender and power, framing femininity as a site of both compliance and resistance. Spivak's (1988) seminal question- "Can the subaltern speak?"- resonates deeply in this context, urging us to ask whether the tawaif, historically silenced by both colonialism and patriarchy, can reclaim voice and agency within contemporary media.

Anchored in these theoretical frameworks, the present study examines how narrative, visual, and performative strategies evolve across *Devdas* and *Heeramandi*. Drawing on Stuart Hall's representation theory- supported by Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity, and McRobbie's articulation of feminist resilience- the study explores how meaning, identity, and ideology are constructed, circulated, and contested within the shifting representation landscape of Indian screen culture. The analysis argues that *Heeramandi*'s movement from patriarchal nostalgia to feminist agency marks not only Bhansali's creative progression but also the broader democratisation of gender narratives in India's OTT age. The tawaif's transformation from objectified spectacle to empowered subject signals a larger cultural redefinition of womanhood- one that reclaims suppressed voices and repositions the tawaif as both cultural preserver and political interlocutor of resistance.

The present study attempts to trace the shift in the representation of tawaifs from Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002) to *Heeramandi* (2024), analysing how their representations have changed with time and medium. It contends that Bhansali's narrative and visual strategies have shifted, outlining how his cinematic language moved from romantic tragedy toward a more nuanced, politically and culturally conscious articulation of women. The study further charts how Bollywood constructs, encodes, and circulates these fixed stereotypes of the tawaifs, usually confining them within patriarchal and moralist frames. On the other hand, *Heeramandi* is explored as a text reconstituting tawaifs as agents of empowerment, cultural preservation, and political participation, thereby challenging the conventional image of them as passive victims of circumstance. Finally, the paper assesses how the transition from classical cinemas to digital streaming platforms has transformed both the portrayal and reception of tawaifs within mainstream Indian visual culture, underlining how new media spaces facilitate more layered, intersectional, and feminist reinterpretations of conventionally marginalised identities.

This study is based on a set of interrelated research questions that collectively examine the evolution of the tawaif figure in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's works. It explores how the representation of tawaifs evolves between *Devdas* (2002) and *Heeramandi* (2024), tracing a transition from tragic and idealised to complex and empowered renditions of the figure. The study further looks at how Bhansali's storytelling and visual aesthetic in *Heeramandi* constitute a departure from the patriarchal tropes involved in *Devdas*, marking a shift away from spectacle and maudlin sentimentality and toward politicisation and feminist assertion. Drawing on Hall's theory of representation, this paper attempts to examine the ways in which Bollywood conventionally produces and perpetuates immutable stereotypes about tawaifs, reducing them into fixed cultural signifiers of desire and sacrifice. It examines how *Heeramandi* reimagines the tawaif as a cultural preserver and a political provocateur, thereby challenging the conventional trope of the doomed courtesan. Finally, the study considers how the shift from classical cinema to digital streaming platforms remakes the representation and reception of tawaifs in Indian visual culture, reflecting wider socio-cultural shifts in gender discourse, audience interaction, and the politics of visibility.

While numerous cinematic and literary studies have analysed the tawaif persona in Indian cultural

traditions, academic literature remains underdeveloped on the effects of changing media platforms upon the evolution of her representation. Much of the existing literature dwells almost exclusively on classical cinematic tawaif presentations' moral and emotional content, thus missing the socio-political and feminist reinterpretations that accompany digital media. Lacking as they are in a time span of two decades, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002) and *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* (2024) present an interesting gap in academic literature on how such films represent larger shifts in narrative structure, audience reception, as well as gender ideology.

This work, therefore, remedies the issue of representational stasis and theoretical abnegation that grips available academic literature by tracing how Bhansali's two films represent and reinterpret the tawaif's identity under altered conditions of media. It seeks to comprehend how present online stories forge a transition beyond Indian visual culture's patriarchal forms of representation towards more empowered as well as subtle feminine characters.

2. Review of Literature

The depiction of tawaifs in Indian cinema has undergone a gradual transformation from celebrated cultural custodians to tragic emblems of beauty, desire, and patriarchal constraint. Kabiraj's (2023) *The Portrayal of Tawaifs in Indian Cinema: A Critical Perspective* and J. Ganguly's (2018) *Reading the "Tawaif": A Study of Pakeezah, Umrao Jaan, Tawaif, and Devdas* both critique how Hindi cinema sentimentalises tawaifs while denying them historical agency. Kabiraj (2023) observes that films like *Pakeezah* (1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981) aestheticise the tawaif's suffering through decorative imagery and melancholic songs, masking patriarchal unease with the notion of female autonomy. Similarly, Booth (2007) argues that Hindi cinema reconstructs the tawaif through moral and emotional codes, turning her into a symbolic figure whose artistic and social agency is overshadowed by patriarchal expectations. Ganguly (2018) extends this reading by arguing that even when these women are depicted sympathetically, their social power and cultural influence are overshadowed by narratives of doomed love and repentance. Together, these scholars reveal how Bollywood transforms the tawaif into a symbol of moral anxiety- an object of desire constrained within the boundaries of virtue and shame.

Building on this trajectory, Sen's (2016) *India through the lens of Devdas: Colonial, Postcolonial, Postmodern* and Roy's (2012) *Filming a Metaphor: Cinematic Liberties, Navarasa Influences, and Digressions in Adaptation* in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* shift focus to Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002). Both critics view Bhansali's lush visual grammar as a negotiation between homage and critique. Sen (2016) interprets *Devdas* as a continuation of colonial nostalgia, where feminine devotion is aestheticised as suffering, while Roy (2012) contends that Bhansali's engagement with Navarasa theory, though visually modern, does not free Chandramukhi from moral confinement. In both readings, *Devdas* positions the tawaif as an emotional anchor for male transformation rather than an autonomous subject. Similarly, Sharma (2023) reveals how modern media platforms reshape classical narratives by reframing memory, identity, and meaning for current audiences, a process similar to Bhansali's transformation of tawaif representation across cinema and OTT spaces.

Moving into the digital era, Suresh's (2024) *Reclaiming Cultural Narratives: Gendered Censorship and Representation in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Heeramandi* marks a decisive shift. Suresh (2024) argues that *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* (2024) reclaims the tawaif from historical misrepresentation, presenting her as both a custodian of culture and a political agent. Unlike earlier films confined to interior, emotional spaces, *Heeramandi* situates tawaifs within the public and political spheres of colonial India. Bhansali's signature aesthetic opulence, once used to romanticise oppression, now functions as a tool of empowerment, visually asserting agency, reclaiming history, and resisting censorship.

This interpretation aligns with Suman's (2024) *Heeramandi, Women, and Culture of Protest in India*, which situates Bhansali's narrative within a wider framework of feminist resistance. She argues that *Heeramandi* transcends individual emancipation to depict tawaifs as part of a collective movement against colonial domination and gendered exploitation. By connecting Bhansali's fictional universe with real histories of women's protest, Suman reframes the tawaif as a figure of national and cultural resilience. Her artistry, once seen as ornamental, becomes an act of rebellion, a continuation of India's long struggle for both freedom and gender justice. Taken together, these studies trace a clear evolution in the cinematic imagination, from romanticised spectacle to feminist rearticulation, revealing how the

tawaif's image continues to serve as a powerful lens through which questions of gender, culture, and power are negotiated in Indian visual media.

Although many works have been published on the representation of tawaifs in Indian cinema, few scholarly works have focused on how this representation changes with changing medialities and ideological contexts. Most of the research still considers Devdas and Heeramandi as two different texts and does not think about the continuum of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's narrative and visual strategies. Moreover, there has been little engagement with Hall's theory of representation as a broader conceptual framework through which one can examine how meaning and ideology are created and renegotiated within these depictions. As such, there still remains a requirement for a comparative, theoretically informed exploration into how Bhansali's shift away from cinematic to digital storytelling repositions the tawaif from the romanticised figure of suffering to that of an empowered agent of culture and resistance within the contemporary mediascape of India.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual and visual analysis of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas (2002) and Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar (2024), examining how both works construct and reshape the figure of the tawaif across different cinematic and digital contexts. The analysis is anchored in Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which offers a framework for understanding how media produces meaning through particular visual and narrative choices. Hall's encoding/decoding model further guides the reading of how audiences may interpret the tawaif's portrayal through dominant, negotiated, or oppositional lenses.

To interpret the gendered visual strategies in the films, the study draws on Mulvey's (1989) concept of the male gaze, especially its role in positioning women as objects of spectacle and emotional depth within patriarchal storytelling. Complementing this, Bhabha's (2012) idea of cultural hybridity is employed to understand the spatial and socio-political negotiations visible in Heeramandi, where colonial structures intersect with indigenous cultural practices to produce new forms of agency. The study also incorporates McRobbie's (2020) articulation of the politics of resilience to analyse how the tawaifs negotiate survival, power, and cultural identity within restrictive social systems.

Together, these frameworks enable an interdisciplinary reading that brings into focus issues of representation, visual culture, spatial politics, and gendered subjectivity. Through close analysis of key scenes, costume aesthetics, set design, and narrative development, the study traces Bhansali's shift from the romanticised melancholia of Devdas to the more layered and politically conscious portrayals seen in Heeramandi.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Representation and Narrative Construction in Devdas

Bhansali's Devdas (2002) defines Chandramukhi (Madhuri Dixit) as the archetypal tragic tawaif—refined yet self-effacing yet confined by social boundaries. Her character remains inseparable from the doomed fate of Devdas (Shah Rukh Khan), reflecting Bollywood's enduring trope of the virtuous courtesan whose love is pure but unfulfilled. Following Hall's representation theory, Devdas does not merely depict but actively constructs meaning, encoding the tawaif within a romanticised framework where beauty and benevolence substitute for agency. Chandramukhi's narrative is driven by self-sacrifice, casting her as a maternal and moral anchor rather than an independent subject. Key scenes, such as her tender care for Devdas in the dimly lit kotha, aestheticise female endurance as poetic suffering. Her famous line, *Kya tawaif ko dil nahi hota?* (Bhansali, 2002, 1:41:24), encapsulates the film's sentimental portrayal of marginalised love, acknowledged emotionally but denied legitimacy. Bhansali's lush cinematography turns this pain into spectacle: in the Maar daala sequence, her decorative dress and choreographed restraint merge opulence with captivity. As Mulvey (1989) argues, such visual framing enacts the "male gaze," where women exist as objects of admiration rather than agents of meaning. The lattice-screen encounter between Chandramukhi and Paro visually reinforces her exclusion from respectability, symbolising the social wall between devotion and legitimacy. Even her gesture of

touching Paro's feet confirms the internalisation of patriarchal ideals. Hall's notion of "fixity" aptly describes how the film naturalises this trope, celebrating the tawaif's moral strength while trapping her within the ideological circle of love, loss, and sacrifice.

Through Hall's encoding/decoding lens, Devdas invites layered readings: a dominant one that glorifies noble suffering; a negotiated one that admires dignity amid constraint; and an oppositional one that challenges how cinematic beauty masks historical subjugation. In doing so, Bhansali's visual language becomes both enchanting and limiting, it creates an emotional universe where the tawaif's pain is aestheticised but her social reality remains silenced.

4.2 Feminist Reclamation and Political Consciousness in Heeramandi

Two decades later, Bhansali's Heeramandi (2024) reopens the same aesthetic world but with an altered ideological core. The series signals a deliberate movement from the ornamental confinement of Devdas to the political assertion of Heeramandi, where tawaifs emerge as agents of resistance and negotiation. The shift is not merely stylistic but structural, enabled by the expansive OTT format that allows for layered storytelling, historical realism, and feminist depth. Unlike Devdas, where the tawaif embodies doomed love, Heeramandi reframes her as a strategist, negotiator, and cultural custodian. Mallikajaan's assertion, *Humare mehfil mein awaaz ke kadradaan aate hai, dukandaar nahi* (Bhansali, 2024, 1:00:00), encapsulates this evolution: the kotha transforms from a private space of emotional endurance into a public site of cultural and political negotiation. Fareedan's ruthless ambition and Bibbojaan's nationalist conviction reveal that the tawaif's survival is no longer passive endurance but deliberate agency. This transformation aligns with what McRobbie (2020) terms the "politics of resilience," where endurance itself becomes a political act of defiance. Within Bhabha's (2012) "third space," Bhansali situates Heeramandi as a hybrid world where colonial and indigenous discourses collide to generate new forms of identity and power. Hall's constructivist framework further helps explain this ideological reversal: while Devdas encoded patriarchal nostalgia, Heeramandi decodes and reconstructs meaning, repositioning the tawaif as a figure of historical consciousness rather than poetic tragedy.

The progression from Devdas to Heeramandi thus marks Bhansali's own evolution, from representing women within mythic constraints to enabling them to reclaim narrative authority. The tawaif who once danced for survival now speaks for sovereignty, turning spectacle into statement and transforming the aesthetics of suffering into the politics of power.

4.3 Spatial and Visual Politics: From Aesthetic Confinement to Historical Agency

Bhansali's distinctive visual narrative, marked by intricate sets, elaborate costumes, and symbolic camerawork, anchors both Devdas and Heeramandi. His aesthetic style not only provides visual splendour but also reflects a shift in ideological focus. Devdas mythologises the tawaif through tragedy and desire, while Heeramandi situates her within a politically charged, historically grounded narrative.

As Dwyer (2006) notes, Bollywood's visual culture often employs spectacle as a moral and emotional code, encoding ideals of femininity and hierarchy through ornamentation. In Devdas, the kotha becomes a closed, aestheticised space, suffused with golden tones and decorative chandeliers, that mirrors Chandramukhi's luxurious captivity. The mise-en-scène transforms beauty into confinement, reinforcing her objectification within patriarchal fantasy. Heeramandi, however, expands this confined world into the broader colonial landscape, turning the kotha into a site of negotiation and political engagement. Through Bhabha's (2012) concept of hybridity, space becomes fluid, blurring the lines between ornament and authority, between aesthetic enclosure and historical agency.

4.4 Cinematography and Lighting: Framing Female Agency and Visual Meaning

Bhansali's cinematography and lighting techniques mark a significant evolution in how tawaifs are framed on screen. In Devdas, Chandramukhi is often bathed in soft, diffused light, reinforcing her ethereal and idealised persona. The use of close-ups and intimate framing heightens the emotional intensity, portraying her longing and pain while perpetuating the stereotype of the beautiful, suffering woman, aligning with Hall's (1997) argument about the media's fixation on representational stereotypes.

In Heeramandi, however, Bhansali adopts a broader, more dynamic visual palette. Contrasting light and shadow emphasise the tension between vulnerability and authority, while expansive tracking shots situate the tawaifs within interconnected social and political landscapes. The use of darker, moodier tones in moments of performance or confrontation underscores not sensuality but strategy, depicting women as calculating agents rather than passive symbols of desire. The stylistic evolution from intimate confinement in Devdas to panoramic scope in Heeramandi signifies a shift in Bhansali's own ideological framing of women, from devotion to defiance.

4.5 Costume and Color Symbolism: From Ornamentation to Power

Costume in Bhansali's cinema functions as narrative language. As Dwyer (2006) observes, attire and ornamentation in Hindi films communicate emotional and moral codes. In Devdas, Chandramukhi's heavily embroidered lehengas and layered jewellery heighten her aesthetic appeal but also signify emotional weight and submission; the splendour of her dress becomes the very emblem of her restraint. In Heeramandi, by contrast, clothing evolves into an assertion of identity and control. The tawaifs dress to project influence—whether as performers, businesswomen, or political actors. Colours and fabrics acquire strategic meaning: red, once tied to passion and tragedy, now embodies power and rebellion; white, traditionally linked to purity, becomes a symbol of resistance, as seen in Bibbojaan's declaration during the freedom struggle- Hum bhi is mulk ka hissa hai... (Bhansali, 2024, 25:15). Through these visual inversions, Bhansali transforms ornamentation into a vocabulary of agency, translating femininity from aesthetic display to political presence.

4.6 Beauty Aesthetics and Feminine Expression: Makeup and Hairstyling as Symbolic Agency

Bhansali's portrayal of beauty evolves from idealisation to empowerment. In Devdas, Chandramukhi and Paro embody ethereal fragility, porcelain skin, soft makeup, and controlled hairstyles reflecting submission and emotional delicacy. This visual grammar idealises passive femininity. In Heeramandi, beauty becomes a tool of assertion. Mallikajaan, Fareedan, and Bibbojaan adopt bold visual markers, dark eyes, defined features, and free-flowing hair, that communicate defiance rather than allure. Fareedan's piercing gaze during her confrontation with a colonial officer exemplifies this transformation: her aesthetic poise signals dominance, not desire. The transition from symmetry to boldness captures Bhansali's ideological shift—from portraying women as ornamental muses to representing them as active agents of narrative and power.

Conclusion

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's directorial shift from the tragic romanticism of Devdas (2002) to the politically charged world of Heeramandi (2024) reflects broader transformations in Bollywood's engagement with history, gender, and spectatorship. Devdas remains within the bounds of mainstream melodrama, aestheticising female suffering within patriarchal nostalgia, whereas Heeramandi utilises the expansive OTT format to reimagine the tawaif as a complex figure of resistance and cultural agency. This evolution aligns with contemporary feminist discourse that reclaims silenced voices from the confines of tragedy and moral idealisation.

The rise of OTT platforms further signifies a cultural and ideological shift in Indian media, enabling more inclusive and intersectional narratives. By decentralising production and expanding representational possibilities, digital platforms allow filmmakers like Bhansali to challenge traditional binaries of virtue and victimhood, and to explore femininity through lenses of power, strategy, and historical consciousness. In this space, the tawaif transforms from an aesthetic muse into a political subject, an emblem of resilience, artistry, and rebellion. Ultimately, Bhansali's cinematic evolution exemplifies a larger movement in Indian storytelling, one that rethinks gendered representation, interrogates inherited patriarchal aesthetics, and contributes to a more plural, feminist media discourse that continues to shape the postmodern imagination.

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Declaration

This manuscript is an original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere in full or in part. The research, analysis, and arguments presented in this article are the author's own. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity, and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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