

## Portrayal of Aging in Bollywood: A Study of Senior Characters in Hindi Cinema

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### Abstract

*Media shapes how we view groups like senior citizens. It's crucial to analyze these portrayals, as stereotypes can be formed based on age, gender, etc. Hindi cinema, with its massive audience, can influence how we treat the elderly. This study examined how characters over 60 are depicted in these films. Researchers used a visual analysis, examining features, objects, and situations surrounding the characters. While some general portrayals exist, each film and the character's social standing influenced how they were shown. This suggests Hindi cinema can play a role in shaping attitudes towards older adults.*

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**Keywords:** Cinema, Elderly characters, Stereotype, Semiotics.

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### Introduction

India's aging population demands a shift in societal attitudes, particularly as families become nuclear. Media, especially movies, plays a crucial role in shaping these perceptions. Films can portray the elderly positively, promoting respect, or negatively, reinforcing stereotypes. This study focuses on how Hindi commercial films depict characters over 60.

Media, unlike formal education, offers continuous learning opportunities. It shapes social behavior by portraying senior citizens in various lights – leading fulfilling lives or struggling with loneliness and weakness. Media coverage can either advocate for the elderly or completely overlook their needs. Movies, a powerful source of information and entertainment, leave lasting impressions. The portrayal of different groups, including age groups, shapes how viewers perceive them.

Ageist stereotypes in movies can lead to discrimination against the elderly. Media content can influence people's thinking and behavior. Given the widespread popularity of Hindi cinema, examining how it portrays older characters is essential. This research aims to understand how these films depict people above 60 and the potential impact on viewers' perceptions.

### Objectives

- To analyze the portrayal of older people in Hindi commercial movies.
- To examine how cinema visually represents older adults.

- To learn how individuals use items and props to depict old age.

### **Review of Literature: Aging and Media**

The portrayal of older individuals in media has been a focal point for numerous scholars examining the interplay between aging and media consumption. Research in this area often highlights the influence of media on audience perceptions of aging, as well as how older individuals engage with media content.

A significant body of research has centered on the depiction of older individuals, particularly women, in film. Bazzini et al. (1997) analyzed 100 motion pictures from the 1940s to the 1980s, revealing an underrepresentation and negative portrayal of older women. This trend persisted in subsequent decades, as evidenced by Smith's (2016) study of top-grossing films in 2015. She found that ageist rhetoric was prevalent, with older characters often misrepresented and demeaned. Similarly, Masterson's research on romantic comedies highlighted the underrepresentation of individuals over 50, often depicted as weak and inept.

Television has also been a subject of scrutiny. Cohen's (2002) study on "The Golden Girls" revealed that while the show challenged some stereotypes, it also reinforced others. Harwood's research on television-watching habits indicated a preference for younger characters among younger viewers and an underrepresentation of older characters in programming. Venkatasubbaiah et al. (2011) examined the portrayal of the elderly in Telugu daily television programs, finding that the media often perpetuated negative stereotypes.

While some studies have focused on the negative portrayal of older adults, others have explored the potential impact of positive representations. Fung et al. (2015) found that while positive portrayals of aging can have beneficial effects on older individuals, they are more likely to appreciate accurate depictions of old age.

Lauzen and Dozier's (2002) analysis of top-grossing films revealed an underrepresentation of both male and female elder characters, with women often portrayed in less prominent roles. Gatling's (2013) study on comedy films offered a more nuanced perspective, highlighting the increasing portrayal of sexuality in older characters while also acknowledging the prevalence of ageist tropes.

Overall, the literature consistently demonstrates an underrepresentation and misrepresentation of older individuals in media. While some progress has been made in challenging stereotypes, ageism remains a pervasive issue in film, television, and other media forms. Future research

should continue to examine the impact of media representations on attitudes towards aging, as well as explore strategies for promoting more positive and inclusive portrayals of older adults.

By understanding the historical and contemporary trends in media representations of aging, researchers and policymakers can work towards developing interventions to challenge ageist stereotypes and promote a more age-friendly media landscape.

**Methodology:** This chapter outlines the methodology employed to explore the portrayal of elderly characters (above 60 years old) in Hindi commercial films. The research adopts a qualitative approach, aiming to gain a nuanced understanding of how filmmakers represent this demographic.

**Research Design:** A descriptive design is utilized, focusing on observing and interpreting the depiction of elderly characters within chosen films. The study leverages Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to delve into the connotative meaning behind these portrayals.

**Sample Selection:** A purposeful sampling strategy was employed. Three Hindi commercial films released between 2000 and 2010 were selected. The primary criterion for film selection was the presence of an elderly character in a prominent role (lead or second lead) to ensure significant screen time for analysis.

### **Qualitative Method Adopted: Visual Analysis**

Specifically, the research employs a form of visual analysis known as Semiotic Analysis.

#### **Key Characteristics of the Method:**

- **Focus on Visual Data:** The study primarily analyzes visual elements (frames from films) rather than textual or verbal data.
- **In-depth Interpretation:** It seeks to uncover deeper meanings and connotations embedded within the visual representations of older characters.
- **Theoretical Framework:** The research is grounded in Roland Barthes' concept of semiotics, which explores the relationship between signs, signifiers, and signified.
- **Descriptive and Interpretive:** It combines detailed observation of visual elements with interpretation of their underlying meanings and cultural significance.

By employing visual analysis and semiotic interpretation, the research offers a rich and nuanced understanding of how older characters are portrayed in Hindi commercial cinema.

## Data Collection

Data collection involved a multi-step process:

1. **Film Selection:** As mentioned, three films (3) were chosen based on the purposeful sampling strategy selected films are 1. Baghban (2003), 2) Khosla Ka Ghosla (2006) and 3) Cheeni Kum (2007)
2. **Scene Selection:** Within each film, three distinct scenes were identified. The selection focused on scenes featuring the elderly character in different settings (e.g., one scene indoors, one outdoors).
3. **Frame Selection:** From each scene, a single frame was chosen for in-depth analysis. The primary criterion for frame selection was location variation to capture the portrayal across diverse settings.
4. **Frame Analysis:** Each chosen frame was analyzed based on the following elements:
  - Character: Hair, makeup, clothing, physique, body language, and outfit.
  - Props: Any objects used by the character, including accessories, devices, and tools.
  - Setting: Location, space, and time of day depicted in the frame.

## Data Analysis

The analysis involved interpreting the observed elements within each frame using Barthes' semiotic framework. This framework focuses on two key questions:

- **Representation:** How are elderly characters portrayed on screen (clothing, posture, surroundings)?
- **Hidden Meanings:** What concepts and values are associated with these portrayals (e.g., wisdom, frailty)?

The interpretations aimed to identify recurring representational patterns across the analyzed frames.

## Case Study Example

**Film:** Piku (2015)

**Scene:** The opening scene where Bhaskor Banerjee (played by Amitabh Bachchan) is introduced. The frame focuses on Bhaskor sitting on a toilet in a cluttered bathroom.

## Analysis

- **Character:** Disheveled hair, lack of makeup, and loose-fitting clothes suggest informality and potential health concerns. Hunched posture and reliance on the toilet seat for support might imply physical limitations.
- **Props:** The cluttered surroundings with overflowing medicine bottles could signify Bhaskor's dependence on medication and potential difficulty with daily tasks.
- **Setting:** The confined bathroom space might represent Bhaskor's limitations or feeling restricted by his physical condition.

**Interpretation:** This frame, using Barthes' method, could be interpreted as filmmakers portraying Bhaskor's old age with a focus on his physical limitations and dependence on medication.

By including additional case studies from different films and scenes, the research aims to identify recurring patterns and gain a deeper understanding of how elderly characters are portrayed in Hindi commercial cinema.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation:

### 1. Baghban (2003)

Raj and Pooja, an elderly couple, are forced apart by their ungrateful sons after Raj's retirement. Despite sacrificing their savings for their sons' futures, they are now deemed a burden. Separated and mistreated, Raj and Pooja find solace in letters and eventually reunite with their adopted son. Raj pens a book about their experience, achieving success and financial independence. Though their sons plead for forgiveness, Raj and Pooja remain unforgiving, finding joy only in their grandchildren's love.

**Scene 1** is Pooja's introduction scene.



Despite recently retiring at 60, Raj's salt-and-pepper hair and fit physique in a tracksuit suggest he prioritizes health. Subtle wrinkles hint at his age. A simple breakfast scene with teacups

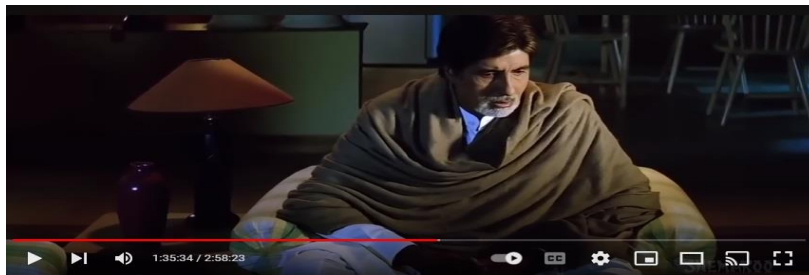
reveals their loving routine. The traditional decor - a kada bracelet, antique lamp, and wooden couch - points to a comfortable bungalow filled with plants they care for. Notably, the analysis should have included Pooja, who waits for Raj with tea and sweets, showcasing their deep affection.

**Scene 2:** Raj and Pooja leave their house to live independently.



A somber mood hangs over Raj's outdated ancestral home at dawn. Sunlight cuts through, highlighting the family gathered outside with suitcases by waiting cabs. Raj, in a suit (unlike his usual tracksuit), stands distant from Pooja, emphasizing their enforced separation. Their faces reveal grief as they face a life crisis – forced relocation to separate houses by their children. Raj's gaze towards Pooja suggests his sadness at the separation, despite initially opposing it.

**Scene 3:** Raj sits in the dark at his son's house.



Sanjay, the son, is dressed in comfortable clothes typically worn by older men at home, hinting at his age. Wrinkles, a worried expression, and a dimly lit environment suggest his unhappiness. Despite a formal haircut and watch, his posture and downward gaze portray sadness and dissatisfaction. The scene implies a tense conversation with his father, possibly about feeling unsupported throughout his life.

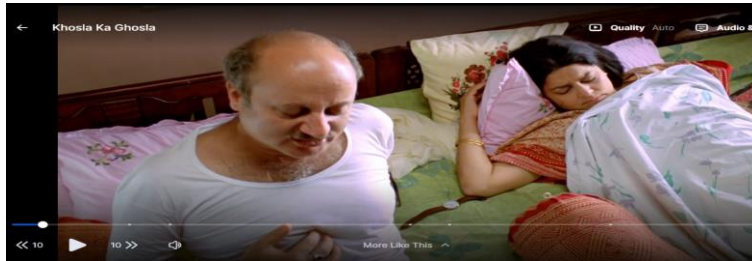
## **2) Khosla Ka Ghosla (2006):**

Kamal, a trusting man, buys land but gets scammed. His impulsive older son tries violence, landing Kamal in jail. The younger son hatches a clever plan to trick the scammer, which Kamal reluctantly agrees to. With his land back, Kamal prioritizes keeping his family in India over his



son's American dreams. The film portrays how aging can make people more reliant on loved ones.

### **Scene 1:** Kamal Kishore's introduction



The man, likely over 60 with white hair and a thin build, is waking up with discomfort. His wrinkled face and hand on his chest suggest stomach issues. He wears a sleep vest, typical of middle-class Indian men. A wristwatch hints at his scheduled life, while the fiber belt and used bedding solidify his middle-class status. His wife sleeps next to him, separated by a cushion. He complains about gas trouble, a common ailment among older people, and blames his wife for eating Rajma at night.

### **Scene 2 :** Kamal and his family are seated in their living room.



An elderly man, likely North Indian with fair skin, is fuming on his old-fashioned couch at home. Loose neck skin, a white mustache, and tired eyes reveal his age. He wears a light-colored kurta, typical of older men for comfort. A towel on his head suggests he's recovering from an event. Despite reclining in comfort, his sharp gaze and angry expression convey his frustration. A wristwatch and rings hint at his middle-class status. The evening light casts an orange glow on the room, highlighting the outdated furniture and somewhat dirty upholstery. We can infer he's upset with his children from the scene following his release from police custody for trying to reclaim his land, which has now been offered at a discounted price.

**Scene 3:** Kamal warns his son not to get entangled with Khurana.



The scene depicts Kamal in Khosla's hallway, looking discouraged. His slumped posture and clothes (old shirt and pants) reflect his low spirits. A metal wall mirror and framed black-and-white pictures with wide margins hint at the traditional setting. The presence of a landline phone and a lock on the entrance door further reinforces this. Kamal warns his son, holding up two fingers (possibly signifying caution), that their plan to trick Khurana won't work. He believes Khurana is too smart and their attempt won't lead to a call from him.

**3) Cheeni Kum (2007)**

This film follows Buddhadev, a successful 64-year-old Indian restaurant owner in London. Despite having a mother and a young friend (with whom he confides in), Buddhadev has never been in love. He's a demanding chef known for his harsh treatment of staff. Everything changes when Nina, a 34-year-old customer, returns a dish for being too sweet. They fall in love despite the age gap and decide to marry. Buddhadev seeks Nina's father's approval, who initially disapproves due to their age difference and resorts to a hunger strike. Eventually, Buddhadev convinces him, and the film highlights the idea that love can blossom at any age, especially for older characters. This movie is chosen because it portrays an elderly Indian man living abroad, contrasting the typical portrayal of older people in India.

**Scene 1:** Buddhadev is introduced.



Buddhadev, a fit 64-year-old chef, embodies a contrast between his active profession and his aging features. Wrinkles, loose neck skin, and white hair with some black patches reveal his age.



A neatly trimmed white French beard adds a touch of sophistication. His demanding personality shines through his hand gestures and sharp gaze, emphasizing his role as a perfectionist and authoritative head chef. We see him in a chef's uniform, barking orders in a kitchen filled with equipment, highlighting his meticulous nature and intolerance for mistakes in the kitchen.

**Scene 2:** When Buddhadev gets home, he sees his mother and the kid, Sexy.



Buddha, a successful Indian chef in London, relaxes in his modern, well-lit living room filled with expensive furniture. Books and a box on a table suggest his family's love for reading. Despite being dressed in black outdoor clothes and formal shoes, hinting at him just arriving home, Buddha appears frustrated. His gaze is fixed on his attractive companion, possibly his girlfriend, while his face is turned towards his mother who is presumably talking to him. This scene suggests tension between Buddha and his mother, possibly regarding his social life or habits like going to the gym, which his mother inquires about.

**Scene 3:** Buddhadev hands Nina his umbrella.



Despite his 64 years, Buddha, a weary-looking chef with wrinkles and tired eyes, beams with delight outside his restaurant. Ditching his usual neckerchief and chef's attire (possibly because he's not working or focused on a woman), he's dressed in his chef's coat. His messy hair lacks its usual neatness. The key element here is the umbrella - Buddha has offered it to a woman, and this exchange sparks their first connection. His subtle smile hints at his budding interest. This scene showcases Buddha's initial meeting with Nina at his cafe, where their love story begins,

marked by the significant age gap between the 64-year-old man and the 34-year-old woman, a central conflict in the film that ultimately leads to their marriage.

### **Findings and summary**

All three characters had slender bodies, with Baghban being fit and healthy due to his age and job. Khosla and Buddhadev seemed feeble. Buddhadev and Raj possessed erect postures. However, Kamal Khosla's shoulders were somewhat down, mainly when chatting with someone. Raj's hair was black with white spots, Kamal was bald with hair just on the side, and Buddhadev had more white hairs on his head. He also wore a ponytail only for stylistic purposes. The indication of white hair represents old age. Raj and Buddhadev's hair was well organized, and they wore a formal appearance.

The faces of Buddha and Raj were slender, but Kamal had a round face. Buddha and Raj wore French beards, while Kamal had a mustache, both in white. The facial skin is wrinkled, and the characters have loose skin around their necks, which is another evidence of old age. The characters' eyes are weak and dim due to their age. Raj and Kamal had sight and wore glasses, but Buddhadev wore a fashionable spectacle for flair. The make-up on all the characters was minimal and bare; there was little attempt to make them seem ancient since the performers were truly aged.

The costumes of the three personas differed; in Baghban, Raj wore formal clothes as a banking employee. When he went out, Kamal favored half shirts, full shirts, and parallel trousers. Buddhadev donned oversized jackets and cold clothing. He was stylish and trendy. Inside the house, Kamal and Raj wore long white kurtas and Indian pajamas, while Buddhadev wore long t-shirts at home and his uniform at work. Raj wore a blanket across his upper torso, which was done to represent his age. The characters wore formal hues such as black, white, and blue. Raj and Kamal both wore watches, with Kamal's including a fiber belt since he is a middle-class guy. Wearing a copper bracelet and threads around the wrist indicates that they are Hindus. Kamal wore several rings for luck and fortune, one of which featured a bead. These were the several signals that the directors utilized to indicate elderly age. The character's job and socioeconomic background were essential for depicting older folks. Kamal was employed and wore largely formal dress, Buddhadev was a chef who wore his uniform, and Raj was a bank employee who favored suits. Raj and Buddhadev were monetarily well-off. Therefore, their portrayal was quite

different from Kamal, who was from the middle class. Since he was from London, Buddhadev's image was also affected by rural culture.

### **Limitations**

While this study explored three films from the recent past, it's important to remember that the portrayal of elderly characters in cinema is vast and ever-evolving. These snippets offer a glimpse into a few cinematic lives, but there are countless other stories to be told.

The narrative within each film focused solely on the older characters themselves, leaving out how others perceived them. This might limit our understanding of the characters' social dynamics and the societal attitudes they navigate.

Finally, the technical aspects of filmmaking, such as camerawork and music, were not considered here. These elements can play a powerful role in shaping how audiences perceive characters, including older ones. A gentle close-up might evoke empathy, while a dramatic score could heighten the portrayal of an older character's struggles.

Despite these limitations, this brief exploration offers a starting point for delving deeper into the portrayal of elderly characters in cinema. By considering a wider range of films and incorporating additional elements of film analysis, we can gain a richer understanding of how these characters are represented on screen.

### **Conclusion**

The silver screen of Hindi cinema has long been a mirror reflecting Indian society. But how accurately does it portray the lives of senior citizens? This study explores this question by examining three films: *Baghban* (2003), *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (2006), and *Cheeni Kum* (2007). While the sample size is modest, it offers a glimpse into the diverse ways filmmakers use visuals and storytelling to depict aging.

The first brushstrokes come through physical appearance. Wrinkles etched like roadmaps across faces, a shift from raven locks to silver strands, and a weariness in the eyes – these are the undeniable markers of time. But the filmmakers go beyond the surface. Clothing becomes a narrative device. Raj (*Baghban*) and Buddhadev (*Cheeni Kum*), both financially secure, command respect through their formal attire. In contrast, Kamal (*Khosla Ka Ghosla*), from a humbler background, is seen in simpler clothes, reflecting his social standing. These details paint a richer portrait, where age intersects with socioeconomic realities.

The stories themselves defy stereotypes. Raj and Pooja in *Baghban* face the gut-wrenching betrayal of their children, highlighting the complexities of changing family dynamics. Kamal, in *Khosla Ka Ghosla*, embodies the vulnerability of dependence as he navigates a land scam. Yet, there's also a celebration of life. Buddhadev, a vibrant chef in London, defies age norms by finding love with a younger woman. This spectrum of experiences showcases the multifaceted realities of aging.

However, the study acknowledges its limitations. Focusing solely on the characters themselves creates a vacuum. How do younger generations perceive these elders? Do they see them with respect, or are there undercurrents of resentment? The analysis also doesn't explore the power of technical aspects like camerawork and music. A gentle close-up might evoke empathy for a frail character, while a dramatic score could heighten the portrayal of their struggles. These elements play a crucial role in shaping audience perception.

Despite these limitations, the research offers a valuable springboard for further exploration. It underscores the need to examine a wider range of films, encompassing diverse characters, narratives, and filmmaking techniques. This would provide a more comprehensive picture of how aging is depicted in Hindi cinema.

Ultimately, the goal is to move beyond the limitations of stereotypes. Hindi cinema has the potential to celebrate the rich tapestry of senior lives, capturing the resilience, wisdom, and even the spark of love that can blossom in golden years. As Indian society grapples with its own aging population, a more nuanced portrayal on screen can foster empathy and understanding between generations. The silver screen has the power to not just reflect, but also to shape reality. By showcasing the vibrant tapestry of aging experiences, Hindi cinema can play a vital role in ensuring a society that respects and cherishes its elders.

### **Key Findings**

- Filmmakers use visual elements like clothing, hairstyles, and props to portray elderly characters.
- Wealthier characters are often shown in formal wear, while middle-class characters dress more simply.
- The stories depict a range of experiences, including challenges faced by seniors and their capacity for love and resilience.

- The study acknowledges limitations: it only analyzed 3 films and focused solely on character portrayal; not how younger generations perceive them.

### Overall Importance

- Hindi cinema can influence societal attitudes towards elderly people.
- By portraying a wider range of senior characters and experiences, films can challenge stereotypes and promote empathy between generations.

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