Research Article

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Cinematic Geographies of Fear: Women, Public Space, and Urban Imaginaries in Indian Cinema

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper explores how Indian cinema mediates the relationship between women, fear, and urban public space. While empirical evidence indicates that women face greater threats in private/domestic domains, cultural narratives persistently frame the city as the locus of danger. Cinema plays a pivotal role in sustaining this disjuncture by producing a **symbolic geography of fear,** a mediated urban imaginary in which women are rendered perpetually vulnerable. Drawing on feminist criminology (Stanko, 1990), spatial theory (Lefebvre, 1991; Puwar, 2004), and Baudrillard's (1981) notion of hyperreality, the study argues that films not only reflect social anxieties but actively shape gendered experiences of mobility, safety, and surveillance. Through critical analysis of films such as *NH10* (2015), *Darr* (1993), *Pink* (2016), *Kahaani* (2012), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), and *Thappad* (2020), the paper examines how cinematic form i.e., mise-en-scène, sound design, framing, and narrative tropes constructs urban space as threatening, surveilled, or reclaimed. While some texts reinforce precautionary cultures of fear, others stage counter-narratives that imagine female agency and spatial entitlement, resonating with feminist interventions like *Why Loiter?* (Phadke, Khan, & Ranade, 2011) and *Pinjra Tod*. By situating cinematic portrayals within India's broader socio-political context, particularly post-2012 debates on women's safety, the paper demonstrates how film operates as both a disciplinary force and a site of resistance. Ultimately, the study contributes to sociology and film studies by positioning cinema as an active agent in the cultural production of gendered urban experience. **Keywords:** Women, Public places, Cinema, Urban fear, Loiter

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology that combines **critical film analysis** with **sociological contextualization**. Rather than treating cinema as a neutral mirror of society, the study approaches films as cultural texts that participate in constructing gendered understandings of public space.
A purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture diverse modes of representation across genres and decades:

• **Trope Reinforcement:** *NH10* (2015), *Darr* (1993), which positions women in spaces coded as dangerous, naturalizing threat and predation.

• **Counter-Narratives:** *Pink* (2016), *Mardaani* (2014), *Kahaani* (2012), which foreground female protagonists as active agents reclaiming space.

• **Ambivalence and Everyday Negotiations:** *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *Thappad* (2020), *Delhi-6* (2009), which complicate binaries of public/private, safety/danger, by situating women's struggles within intertwined domestic and urban geographies.

This corpus was chosen to expose the spectrum of cinematic strategies, from reinforcing hegemonic constructions of female fear to challenging them through counter-discourses.
Each film was analyzed across three interrelated dimensions:

• **Narrative and Character Tropes:** Identifying how women are positioned in relation to urban space as victims, trespassers, agents, or disruptors.

• **Cinematic Form:** Studying mise-en-scène, soundscapes, framing, and editing to reveal how atmospheres of fear, surveillance, or empowerment are visually and aurally encoded.

• **Thematic Patterns:** Situating these representational choices within broader sociological concepts, such as Stanko's "everyday fear," Puwar's "space invaders," Lefebvre's production of space, and Baudrillard's hyperreality.

The cinematic findings were embedded within India's socio-political landscape, particularly discourses around urban safety post-2012 Delhi, feminist movements like *Why Loiter?*, and state-led "Safe Cities" campaigns. This step underscores how cinema intersects with and often exceeds policy and activism, shaping the cultural logics through which women negotiate the city.

Theoretical Framework

The study is situated at the intersection of feminist sociology, urban theory, and film studies. Its central concern is the cultural production of women's fear in public spaces, not merely as a reflection of material conditions but as a socially constructed phenomenon mediated by cinema. The following theoretical pillars guide the analysis:

Fear and Everyday Life: Feminist Criminology

Elizabeth Stanko's (1990) work on women's "everyday fear" provides the foundation for understanding how threat is normalized as part of women's daily navigation of the city. Fear of crime, as Stanko argues, is less about the statistical probability of victimization and more about the **gendered socialization of risk**, which leads women to adopt precautionary routines like avoiding certain routes, dressing cautiously, or restricting night-time mobility. This study draws on her insights to interrogate how Indian films embed these "safety scripts" into their narratives, thereby reinforcing a culture of self-surveillance and spatial withdrawal.

Nirmal Puwar's concept of "space invaders" (2004) illuminates how women, particularly in male-dominated environments, are marked as outsiders. Urban public spaces such as streets, buses, and parks often construct women as temporary trespassers rather than rightful inhabitants. In cinema, this marginality is heightened through visual and narrative cues that portray women as out of place or under constant scrutiny. By employing Puwar's framework, the paper examines how films render urban geographies gendered, producing symbolic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Henri Lefebvre's notion of the "production of space" (1991) emphasizes that space is not neutral or merely physical but socially produced through practices, representations, and imaginaries. In the cinematic context, the city is not just a backdrop but an active participant in the narrative: dark alleys, deserted highways, and crowded markets acquire symbolic value as sites of menace or resistance. By reading films through Lefebvre, the study highlights how the spatial organization of fear becomes integral to the cultural construction of gendered subjectivities. Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality (1981) offers another lens: media representations can produce a "simulacrum of fear" that is more potent than actual material risk. Indian films frequently amplify urban danger through heightened sound design, menacing nightscapes, or stylized violence, producing a sense of omnipresent threat that exceeds empirical crime data. In this sense, cinema does not merely reflect fear but constructs a hyperreal city where women are perpetually unsafe, shaping both popular imagination and everyday practices of mobility. Finally, feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's critique of the "male gaze" (1975) and subsequent interventions on female spectatorship, offers tools to assess whether certain films disrupt the traditional positioning of women as passive victims. Films like *Pink* and *Kahaani* mobilize alternative cinematic strategies that reframe women as agents of justice, intelligence, and resilience, thereby challenging the gendered production of fear. By foregrounding these counter-narratives, the study identifies spaces of possibility within cinema for reimagining women's relationship to the urban.

Taken together, these frameworks enable a layered analysis: Stanko and Puwar reveal the **sociological embedding of fear**, Lefebvre uncovers its **spatial production**, Baudrillard explains its **mediated intensification**, and feminist film theory highlights the **potential for resistance**. This theoretical constellation ensures that the analysis moves beyond surface-level readings of filmic texts to interrogate the deep entanglement between gender, space, and cinematic representation in the Indian urban context.

Analysis

The selected films reveal recurring yet contradictory cinematic strategies in representing women's relationships with urban public spaces. While some reproduce fear as the dominant frame through which women encounter the city, others offer counter-narratives that foreground resilience, resistance, and agency. The analysis proceeds in three clusters: (1) the construction of urban threat, (2) surveillance and self-surveillance, and (3) counter-narratives of agency and reclamation.

The Construction of Urban Threat

In *NH10* (2015) and *Darr* (1993), the city and its liminal edges are framed as inherently dangerous for women. In *NH10*, Meera's nocturnal drive through the Gurgaon highway becomes an allegory of gendered vulnerability: dim lighting, empty landscapes, and sudden intrusions of male figures visually code space as hostile. The film's reliance on suspenseful soundscapes like distant footsteps, accelerating vehicles this renders fear almost palpable, aligning with Stanko's notion that women are taught to expect danger as part of their everyday negotiations. *Darr* similarly exemplifies how women's mobility in public space is policed through male obsession. Kiran's attempts at ordinary urban life are constantly interrupted by the stalker's presence, the camera often adopting his point of view. Here, Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality is at play as the film amplifies stalking into an omnipresent threat, producing an exaggerated sense of danger that spills into popular memory, long outlasting the narrative itself. Both films normalize the idea that public movement for women is shadowed by the inevitability of male predation.

Surveillance and Self-Surveillance

The cinematic city is often portrayed as a site of constant watching, by men, institutions, or the audience itself. In *Kahaani* (2012), Vidya Bagchi navigates Kolkata while visibly pregnant, a state that amplifies her vulnerability in the public eye. Yet the film complicates this surveillance by ultimately revealing her calculated manipulation of those who underestimate her. Lefebvre's notion of the production of space becomes crucial here: Kolkata is simultaneously threatening (narrow alleys, male-dominated police stations) and empowering, as Vidya turns the very city into her terrain of resistance. In *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), surveillance shifts to the domestic and semi-public. The women's desires, like smoking, swimming, and pursuing relationships, are constrained by the ever-present gaze of community and kin. The film blurs the line between private and public, showing how fear of judgment restricts mobility as effectively as fear of violence. The mise-en-scène of cramped apartments and overheard conversations mirrors Foucault's panopticon, suggesting that women internalize surveillance, limiting themselves before even entering public space.

Counter-Narratives of Agency and Reclamation

Other films disrupt the inevitability of fear by positioning women as active negotiators of space. *Pink* (2016) explicitly addresses the politics of women's presence in nightlife spaces. Its courtroom setting dramatizes the clash between patriarchal scripts of respectability and women's right to inhabit the city on their own terms. The film mobilizes Puwar's idea of "space invaders": the women are punished not for transgression per se, but for asserting their entitlement to spaces coded as masculine. Through its narrative resolution, however, the film redefines urban nightlife as a legitimate arena for female presence, reframing agency as a legal and social claim to space. Similarly, *Mardaani* (2014) and *Thappad* (2020) present women not as passive figures of fear but as disruptors of patriarchal order. In *Mardaani*, the female police officer directly confronts trafficking networks in the city, her authority reframing public space as a site of justice rather than threat. *Thappad*, though focused on domestic violence, situates its protagonist's decision to leave her marriage within the broader symbolic economy of space: stepping out of the marital home becomes a reclaiming of autonomy, paralleling the negotiation of urban mobility.

The Ambivalent City

Finally, films such as *Delhi-6* (2009) complicate binary readings of safety versus danger by presenting the city as ambivalent, simultaneously oppressive and liberating. Roshan's urban wanderings intersect with Bittu's aspirations to participate in the world beyond Old Delhi's boundaries. Here, Lefebvre's production of space intersects with Stanko's everyday fear: Bittu's dream of entering a televised singing contest is not merely personal ambition but a claim to occupy broader social and spatial arenas traditionally denied to women. Across these films, the cinematic city emerges as a **symbolic geography of fear**, constructed through lighting, sound, narrative, and gaze, but also as a contested terrain where women negotiate belonging. While certain films discipline women into precautionary self-regulation, others reimagine the city as a space of possibility. Taken together, these portrayals illustrate the dual role of cinema: both perpetuating hyperreal constructions of danger and offering a counter-narratives that destabilize them. The analysis suggests that cinema functions not merely as a cultural mirror but as a cultural producer, shaping how women experience, imagine, and contest their place in the Indian urban landscape.

Discussion

The analysis of cinematic texts demonstrates that women's fear in Indian cities is not simply a reflection of empirical crime rates but a **socially and culturally constructed reality**. As Stanko (1990) reminds us, women live with "the constant low-level hum of fear," a condition sustained not only by material risks but also by cultural scripts that naturalize the expectation of danger. Indian cinema both reflects and reinforces this hum, turning the city into a symbolic space where women's mobility is always under negotiation.

Statistical data from the National Crime Records Bureau repeatedly suggests that women face greater danger in private/domestic contexts than in public ones. Yet popular discourse, especially post-2012 Delhi gang-rape, has cemented the city street as the paradigmatic site of female vulnerability. Here, Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality is useful: cinematic narratives of stalking, abduction, and nocturnal threat produce an exaggerated sense of urban peril that often exceeds lived experience. Films such as *NH10* and *Darr* thus do not merely dramatize violence; they sustain a **cultural climate of fear** that disciplines women into risk-averse behaviors, including avoidance of certain spaces, reliance on male escorts, or the strategic modification of appearance and movement.

The films also underscore how women's use of public space is mediated by a regime of surveillance that extends beyond physical safety. As *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and *Kahaani* illustrate, women are often rendered "space invaders" (Puwar, 2004) in both public and private domains, marked as transgressors merely by inhabiting certain environments. Respectability politics further intensify this surveillance: in *Pink*, the protagonists are judged not for unlawful behavior but for entering nightlife spaces associated with "bad" women. Cinema here becomes a crucial site where respectability is contested, showing how fear and moral policing converge to produce restrictions on female mobility. Importantly, the corpus also reveals fissures in this hegemonic construction of fear. Films like *Kahaani* and *Mardaani* invert tropes of female vulnerability, presenting women as agents who reshape the symbolic geography of the city. *Pink* pushes this further by reframing nightlife as a legitimate and legal domain of women's presence, challenging the idea that urban leisure is inherently male. Such counter-narratives resonate with feminist urban activism in India, exemplified by movements such as "Why Loiter?" (Phadke et al., 2011) and "Pinjra Tod," which explicitly call for women's right to claim public space without the burden of respectability or precautionary fear. Cinema, in these instances, becomes not only a reproducer of fear but also a **vehicle of imaginative resistance**.

Yet the urban is never reducible to binaries of safe/dangerous or oppressive/liberating. Films like *Delhi-6* foreground the ambivalence of the city: a space of opportunity, aspiration, and connection, but also of communal conflict and patriarchal control. Lefebvre's conception of the production of space helps capture this ambivalence: cinematic cities are produced through overlapping imaginaries of menace, surveillance, and possibility. Women's negotiation of these urban landscapes is therefore less about choosing between safety and freedom than about navigating the contradictions embedded in the very structure of urban life. Taken together, these findings suggest that Indian cinema cannot be treated as mere entertainment or reflection. Instead, it functions as a **cultural institution that actively shapes urban subjectivities**, embedding fear into women's everyday routines while also offering counter-discourses that enable them to imagine spatial freedom. The sociology of cinema thus demands a dual focus: on how films reproduce hegemonic gendered geographies of fear, and on how they open up spaces of resistance by reimagining women's entitlement to the city.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Indian cinema constructs, amplifies, and occasionally resists the cultural imagination of women's fear in urban public spaces. Through critical analysis of films ranging from thrillers (*NH10*, *Darr*) to feminist narratives (*Pink*, *Kahaani*, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*), the study demonstrated that cinematic representations play a crucial role in producing a **symbolic geography of fear,** one that frequently exceeds empirical realities of crime and instead reflects deeply gendered social anxieties.

Drawing on feminist criminology, urban sociology, and film theory, the paper argued that these representations are not merely descriptive but constitutive: they shape the ways in which women perceive, inhabit, and contest the city. Films that reinforce narratives of male predation and female vulnerability contribute to a culture of self-surveillance and spatial withdrawal, while counter-narratives disrupt this logic by foregrounding women's agency and entitlement to public space. This duality reveals cinema's ambivalent position as both a disciplinary apparatus and a site of resistance.

Importantly, the analysis situated these cinematic constructions within the broader socio-political context of contemporary India. The post-2012 Delhi discourse on women's safety, the proliferation of "safe city" policies, and feminist activist interventions such as *Why Loiter?* and *Pinjra Tod* underscore how questions of gendered mobility are at the heart of urban modernity. Cinema, as a mass cultural form, both draws from and contributes to these debates, offering imaginaries that shape everyday practices of fear, desire, and resistance. The study contributes to sociological scholarship by highlighting cinema as a central cultural mediator in the production of gendered urban experience. It also intervenes in film studies by moving beyond textual analysis to situate cinematic narratives within lived geographies of fear and mobility. In doing so, the paper underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches that treat cinema not simply as representation but as part of the material and symbolic infrastructure of the city.

Future research may extend this inquiry by examining regional cinema, digital streaming content, and documentary forms, all of which engage differently with questions of women, fear, and public space. Moreover, ethnographic studies of audience reception could illuminate how cinematic portrayals of danger and agency intersect with women's lived strategies of navigating the urban. Ultimately, the findings suggest

that cinema is not only a mirror of society but a participant in shaping urban life. To reimagine cities where women can loiter, linger, and move without fear requires not only structural change in policing and urban planning but also a cultural reorientation, of which cinema is an indispensable part.

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