

Women Refashioned: A Scanning of Feminist Consciousness in Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

Cinema is not only a popular media of entertainment but also plays an imperative role in shaping opinions, creating phantasmagorias, and reinterpreting domineering cultural values. Hindi cinema is seen as a vital point of reference for Indian culture in our country.

A number of researches have been carried out to trace the position and role of women in different societies. Over past decades, Indian cinema has countersigned a noteworthy alteration in the way women are portrayed through movies. Contemporary movies characterize women as more self-governing, confident and career driven. To some extent they strike a balance where 'modern feminism' interacts with 'traditional values.' The present paper deals with representation of women characters in Hindi movies. The paper will also study how mainstream Hindi movies have confined themselves to demarcated sketches of womanhood, considering that the mainstream Hindi cinema is constructed from patriarchal point of view.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Cinema, Patriarchal and Indian Culture.

Movies are considered to be the most popular medium of mass communication in India. Although the impact of movies on the Indian populace has not yet been studied systematically, scholars focusing on films as popular culture speculate its influence to be quite strong. Abbas and Sathe write:

In a country, where less than five percent (sic) buy or read newspapers and books, the Hindi film is the only popular form of literature and art for the vast masses of the common people. Their contact with prose is the dialogue that

they hear; the only poetry that enriches their lives is the poetry of film lyrics. Hence the importance of the talkie that can educate and inspire the people even while entertaining them. (1985: 369)

Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture in this century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding art form could ever achieve. Hindi cinema has influenced the way in which people perceive various aspects of their own lives. Film criticism has a value for literary studies for it allows us to view them differently, to look for the unconscious reflection of social reality, the underlying power structures, the frames which melt into each other, the repetitive narrative patterns, the dialogues which use myth and history, the juxtapositions which take place and the simultaneity which the medium allows. There is no possible way that literature departments can hold themselves aloof from the cinematic medium, especially when the cinema has never shown any hesitation in appropriating literature for its purpose. When we decided to look at Indian films from the point of view of gender, a number of questions cropped up. What does feminism mean? Do we mean the focus on women's issues or empathy with the feminist agenda? Or does it mean the position of women vis-a-vis the nation and their search for the subject position. These and many allied issues are all encompassed by feminism. For feminism itself, the written text and social activism are no longer enough in themselves. It needs to interact with all forms of media newspapers, journalism, theatre and film. The digital age has ushered images of Indian women into our homes, whether it be on our television sets, our computer screens, or in our newspapers. Bollywood is a multi-billion dollar industry that produces more films annually than any other country. Globalization and Western influence have played a major role in the way Bollywood movies have developed and changed over the past few years.

The Indian film industry is a male-dominated industry. Women who pursue a career within the industry are mostly either actresses or playback singers. However, this trend has undergone a little change in recent years, where women have emerged as choreographers, costume designers, editors and screenwriters, but the number is much less when compared to their male counterparts. Very few women are lyricists or composers. So, in an industry that has a very sparse number of women behind the camera, it can be assumed that the portrayal of women onscreen by male directors and other male professionals will have gender biases and constraints and this may not

always convey women's world views, perceptions and subjective realities (Nandkumar 2011). The roles played by the women onscreen are mostly the male director's notion of what roles women ought to be playing. This notion is based on the director's beliefs, attitudes, and values, combined with the director's perception of the viewers' demand (Nand kumar 2011). Similarly, Richards (1995) observes, "The Hindi film upholds the traditional patriarchal views of society which, fearful of female sexuality, demands of the woman, a subjugation of her desires" (p. 3). Male Indian audiences who view commercial Indian movies tend to hold more patriarchal values and view films that reinforce these stereotypical images of women (Rokeach 1968; Littlejohn and Foss 2005). Thus, cinema plays an essential role in shaping views about gender roles and gender identities within the Indian context where women are viewed as playing subordinate roles to men (Bagchi 1996 and Ram 2002).

Numerous studies have shown that cinema and society influence each other. Despite the tendency to portray women either as the hero's love interest, successful homemaker, or as a vamp in mainstream commercial cinema (Nandkumar 2011), an alternative approach has been the emergence of independent films that portray issues of concern to women from agynocentric perspective. Many of these films portray women as strong-willed and independent (Rahman 1988). According to Laxmi (1991), "From the passive wife of Dadasaheb Phalke's 'Raja Harishchandra' to the long-suffering but heroic mother-figure of 'Mother India' to the liberated single-parent of 'Mother'98', women have come a long way in transforming their image. Despite the changes, women are still portrayed as a secondary character in most commercial films even today. This stereotypical portrayal of women in Indian cinema is mainly due to historical and cultural reasons (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 2004). Satyajit Ray is known as the fountainhead of the postcolonial art house cinema (Fay 2011 & DasGupta1983). It is believed that he was also influenced by the great poet and the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (Fay 2011). He was the first director who was bold enough to break the conventions of commercial Indian cinema and introduce social issues like poverty, violence against women, and superstition in his movies (DasGupta 1983). Ray has been awarded numerous prestigious international awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Oscar in the year 1992. Besides this, he has been immensely popular in the western pedantic domain of cinema, as his works have been mentioned in various film textbooks (Sengupta 2011).

The issues of media, identity and gender are being discussed all over today. They have become integral to the discipline of media studies. The reason is the popularity and diversity of media as a source of mass consumption and its influence on constructing ideas and generating debate. The media scene in India has expanded in the recent times, as there is a plethora of media choices available to the audiences. Media structures and systems have also undergone a sea change with privatization and globalization. Huge corporations with their own profit motives own media houses. Media has been able to transcend borders and look at issues more holistically rather than in the context of nationalism. Hence, these developments are bound to affect the manner in which media scrutinizes and covers any issue – gender being an important one. Women are also major consumers of mass media and thus the way they are represented in media coverage is a major concern for the discipline. The interest in films taken by feminists' stems from concern about the under-representation and misrepresentation of women in cinema. It adopts a critical approach towards gender bias on celluloid. Feminist critique of cinema has helped to view the reality presented by cinema in a different way and thus has contributed significantly to the discipline of media studies as well as film studies. The theory of "Absences and Presences" was concerned with the absence of a certain type of female characters in films and the presence of the other type, which was seen to be influenced by patriarchal values. Thus feminist theory in its critique of films incorporated the valorization of women's experiences thereby posing a challenge to gender hierarchy as well as opening up new realms for a post-gendered future.

Women in Bollywood have been uni-dimensional characters, which are good or bad, white or black. There are no shades of grey. This dichotomy was reinforced in popular films that distinguished between the heroine and the vamp, the wife and the other woman. Films have also been inspired to a large extent from religion and mythology whereby women characters were seen as the epitome of virtue and values, those who could do no wrong. The image of women as "Sita" has been repeatedly evoked in many films after independence. Through the ideas of loyalty and obedience to the husband, Hindi cinema successfully institutionalized patriarchal values. Films like "Dahej" (1950), "Gauri" (1968), "Devi" (1970), "Biwi ho to Aisi" (1988), "Pati Parmeshwar" (1988) depicted women as passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families. The decade of the nineties in Hindi cinema was

one, which popularized the genre of family drama. There were several family films which went on to become blockbusters and which reinforced the patriarchal values of the Indian society. Such family oriented films essentially talked about family bonding and has women playing larger than life roles centered on values like love, care, discipline, obedience etc. While women were very much important characters in these films, their identities were absent from the film's text. Their roles were defined in relation to their family especially the male characters in the family. There are many other examples of gender bias on screen and they are not limited to a particular era of films. For e.g. in war movies across time, women have been relegated to lovers who keep waiting endlessly for men fighting war. The courtesan, a subject of examination in many Hindi films (Devdas, Umrao Jaan, Pakeezah, Chameli), is a character that evokes sympathy from the hero. The hero will fall for her; but will never marry her because the purity of the institution of marriage does not allow this union. Contemporary cinema has attempted to explore taboo subjects like sexuality, infidelity, surrogacy, divorce, live-in relations etc. through movies like Jism (2003), Astitva (2000), Salaam Namaste (2005) etc. For e.g. Chak De India (2007) talks about the conflicts that women face when they decide to excel in the field chosen by them. In the movie's case the field is sports. The sportswomen in the movie are shown to negotiate these conflicts and not be morally upright by choosing family over career. They are not super-women; they are just normal beings that are able to decide their priorities. Realistic cinema is different from popular cinema in the way that it takes inspiration for its subjects from real life situations and existing circumstances in the society. Though, it may apparently fall in the realm of popular cinema, its approach and treatment of characters is more convincing than popular cinema. It is interesting to examine some films from this brand of cinema, which is becoming popular among audiences. This type of cinema combines popular appeal and critical acclaim. Movies like Black Friday (2004), Udaan (2010), No One Killed Jessica (2011), Once Upon a Time in Mumbai (2010); Akrosh (2010) etc can be listed under this type of cinema. The females in Bhandarkar's films are usually shown as bold and empowered women who lead life on their own terms, take their own decisions, are "rebels" who don't conform to social norms and excel in their respective professions. A very positive portrayal of an independent leading lady characterizes the initial reels of his films. However, through the progress of the film mid-way, there is a downslide in the protagonist's assertion and she slowly gets inclined to fit in the society's mould. In

the end, she either has to fit in the norm or end up as a sufferer. There is a subtle reinforcement of the very value system that the film critiques at its outset. His films have been disparaged for being too judgmental by giving lessons on morality to the viewer.

It is difficult to come to a uniform conclusion on the portrayal of celluloid women. Considering the fact that women in India are not a homogenous group – they belong to different religions, castes, class, socio-economic status and have different kinds of ambitions and desires as a result of which they lead different lives, it is improper to conclude that women on Indian silver screen have been portrayed in an identical manner. The portrayal of course has to be sensitive to the category to which they belong. For e.g.: An urban middle class woman's story would be entirely different from that of a woman in a village. Films thus have to be responsive towards the context in which they locate women characters. Women characters should possess agency to dismantle the existing power structures as well as be able to negotiate their own position within this structure. It is time that cinema seeks a redefinition of women as objects of male gaze. Women's experiences and dilemmas as points of narration are the need of the hour. Going beyond the stereotypes will do a great help to the cause of women in Indian society. Cinema has to create a separate and independent space for Indian women to help them realize their dreams. Cinema's only end is not to entertain. It must begin a quest for social change through entertainment.

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