

Testing Tumhari Sulu on the Bechdel and Mako Mori Scale: Does it take us Towards Realization of Goal Five of UNDP?

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Abstract

Indian Cinema has come a long way from depiction of women in subordinate ancillary roles to women-centric films. With world drifting fast towards the fulfillment of UN 2020 goals, India is trying to build up as an egalitarian society as far as gender is concerned; at least the Government plans envisage such a society. Films play an important role not only in depiction of the society but also in forming and recreating it. Keeping in mind India's ambition of gender equality by 2020 in order to meet the UNDP goal five, the paper looks at one of the most celebrated women-centric films of Indian Hindi Cinema, Tumhari Sulu. There are a couple of media tests that are applied to determine the representation of women on screen. The present paper has applied Bechdel test and Mako Mori test to ascertain the representation of women in popular Hindi cinema. Does Tumhari Sulu, the women-centric film pass the litmus test? Can we say that gender equality has arrived in India as represented in this popular film?

Keywords: Bechdel Test, Mako Mori Test, Tumhari Sulu, Patriarchy, Women-Centric films.

The United Nations has enlisted the gender equality and empowerment of women as goal number five in its list of millennium sustainability goals. Gender is a social construct that is deeply rooted in the layers of the social system. Gender equality is the dream that the world wishes to bring to reality. Despite the development in various sectors the gender biases continue to rule the

social mindset. As per UN data, "in 155 countries, at least one law exists which impedes women's economic opportunities. The gender pay gap costs global economy \$160 trillion. Only 23.7% of all national parliamentarians are women. One in three women experience some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes." [1] Although India has achieved 100 percent

enrolment of girls at the primary education level but data suggests that 74% women have not enrolled themselves for higher education. As of June 2019, the Lok Sabha seats held by women had touched 11% but there is representation of women amounting to 46% in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Violence against women is the main issue that poses a major challenge in reaching gender parity in India. “As an example, a baseline study revealed that in New Delhi, 92% of women had experienced some form of sexual violence in public spaces during their lifetime. In 2016, close to a third of total crimes reported against women in India was cruelty or physical violence by her husband or his relative. The Government of India has identified ending violence against women as a key national priority, which resonates with the Sustainable Development targets of the United Nations on gender equality.” [2] It is in the light of such disturbing data that the present paper looks into the representation of women in a proclaimed woman-centric film *Tumhari Sulu*.

In the Indian scenario, patriarchy is embedded deep in the social structures and it directs gender roles and behaviours. Despite the perpetual efforts of the government and intervention of NGOs the attitudes towards women in the Indian society tend to remain constant. Indian cinema primarily identified as Bollywood, definitely showcases the social

beliefs, attitudes and gender roles. The films are one of the most powerful agencies to understand the social dynamics. Films not only showcase the prevalent belief systems but also influence the change and can become active agents of change. With Indian government becoming more and more aggressive in ensuring gender parity, the Bollywood too has come up with its share of social responsibility and tried to make films which are apparently women-centric.

Traditionally, Bollywood cinema had kept women in the films as beauty objects for decorative purposes or for performing ancillary roles that support the male lead. The goals of the male protagonists were central to the theme of the movie and women helped them achieve those goals seeking vicarious fulfillment through the fulfillment of the goals of male counterparts. The presence of women in Bollywood cinema has been primarily as the love interest, a mother, sister, or any other relative, a secretary, or a woman dancing and singing to please the male protagonists. However, the recent trend in the Bollywood popular cinema has tried to put women at the centre of the action and look at their roles from a different perspective, where they appear to have a meaningful life, independent of men and try to establish their own identity as an individual being. For this purpose the film directors have not only chosen

contemporary women as characters, but they have also tried to look back at History.

If we try to look at representation of women in Bollywood cinema, we can look at it from the point of view of number of women directors, women crew members and characters associated with film industry. However, these statistics do not create and impact on the public in general and do not form opinions of people. The paper is primarily concerned with the representation of women in Cinema as it influences the mind sets of people. Then, there are films that have men in the lead role and they stand up for women causes, for example, Padman and Pink are two such movies that aim at creating a different mindset regarding women but have male protagonists taking up the cause. The purpose of this paper is to find out the screen space that is granted to women, in the film that has female character not only in the lead but also in the Title. The researcher has undertaken this task to evaluate the cinema space given to women and the possible influence that this movie might have on the patriarchal society. The theoretical framework applied to understand the phenomenon is a mixture of Bechdel test and Mako Mori test.

What do these media critique tests aim at? What strategies are applied in order to mark the representation of women in the cinema? Bechdel test or the Bechdel-Wallace test was created by the well known cartoonist Alison

Bechdel after getting inputs from Liz Wallace and Virginia Woolf. The Bechdel test has three easy, clear-cut ways of finding about how much space cinema has provided to women:

1. A film must have at least two women characters in it that have been given specific names.
2. These women characters at some point of the movie talk to each other.
3. They talk about something other than men.

Interestingly, many films fail even such a simple test. For example films like Tanu Weds Manu Returns that has woman at the centre fails this test, Veere di Wedding showcases women going solo also fails this test because women are talking to each other about men only, Highway fails this test so does Revolver Rani. The purpose of Bechdel test was not to study the feminist concerns in a movie but to reveal that how little space is allotted to women characters, thereby, marginalizing them in the mainstream entertainment and reinforcing the idea of patriarchy. The very first point of analyses presupposes a basic presence of two women characters with specific names. Surprisingly many mainstream movies do not pass this step because of the Smurfette principle. Second step though seems easy and achievable yet some movies fail there and last step where women are supposed to have a talk where

men shouldn't figure is the most difficult part of this litmus test. It may be pointed out that even if women are not talking about men they might be talking about stereotypical topics that largely fall in the domain of feminine, then how does test ensure the gender equality? Kapoor, Hansika & Bhuptani, Prachi & Agneswaran, Amuda. (2015) in their essay *The Bechdel in India: Gendered depictions in contemporary Hindi cinema*, reversed the Bechdel Test and applied on Hindi cinema to assess the male character depiction in three categories of Indian Hindi Cinema: Top grossing, women centric and parallel cinema. In a reverse Bechdel, a movie would have to have "at least two men, who talk to each other, about something other than a woman, and other than stereotypical topics such as their profession, recreation such as sports, games, sex, cars, and world news such as politics or talks related to technology." They found out that male representation was fairly balanced in all three genres of films, where the content of their conversations were not dictated by gender. [3] Since Bechdel test did not sufficiently measure the gender representation the researcher has added a combination of another popular media test, the Mako Mori test. The Mako Mori test attempts to test the non-centricity of men to a woman character's own narrative arc.

1. At least one female character;
2. Who gets her own narrative arc;

3. That is not about supporting a man's story.

For the purpose of this paper an Indian Hindi Bollywood mainstream popular film was taken. The researcher selected mainstream popular film because this film had a greater penetration into the masses and could exercise influence in creating opinions..

Tumhari Sulu was released worldwide on 17 November 2017, and it recorded a huge success on box office doing a business of about 50 crore INR. The film received nine Film Fare award nominations and Vidya Balan the lead lady won the Best Actress Award. It was remade in Tamil as *Kaatrin Mozhi* in 2018.

Does the movie pass the Bechdel test? The first parameter is the number of female characters. *Tumhari Sulu* has eight female characters: Vidya Balan as Sulochana "Sulu" Dubey, Neha Dhupiya as Maryam "Maria" Sood, Sulu's employer at 'Radio Wow'; R J Malishka as RJ Albeli Anjali, Sulu's colleague at 'Radio Wow'; Sindhu Shekharan as Aradhana, one of Sulu's elder twin sisters; Seema Taneja as Kalpana, the second twin sister; Trupti Khamkar as lady cab driver; Sonel Singh as Girija - Receptionist at the radio station 'Radio Wow'; and Vibhavari Deshpande as Constable. The film makes a desperate attempt to break the stereotypes by overtly presenting the lady cab driver, by

showing all the women characters pursuing careers in fields like banks, radio, airlines, police service and gym trainer, and the protagonist Sulu trying hard to get economically independent.

Do they talk to each other? They talk to each other for good amount of time and they do share screen space but unfortunately, many a times when they are talking to each other, a male character is either sitting in the background or hovering around, denying them hundred percent screen space. Do they talk about things other than men? Even when at few times it's an all women space, the conversation is about Sulu's son, or father or husband. Her elder twin sisters mock her, seeing her as undereducated as compared to them. Ashok Sulu's husband, their father and Sulu's son inevitably become a part of the conversation whenever women with specific names talk to each other. Although the film was acclaimed by the critics as liberating for women, the film has failed at the Bechdel test. It is strange that on the outset Bechdel test seems to be very simplistic, and a low bar test for judging the gender representation in films, but on its application to the films, one realizes how deeply patriarchy is embedded in our social system.

On application of Mako Mori test we realize that the film does slightly better. The first parameter of Mako Mori test is that the film

must have one female character. Second test is that she must get her own arc. In the film *Tumhari Sulu* we see that Sulochana Dubey, nicknamed Sulu played by Vidaya Balan is a middle-class housewife living a life full of fun and love along with her 11 year old son and Ashok, her husband who is a manager in a tailoring firm. She lives in Virar with her family. The husband is a bit frustrated because the new boss has taken over. Sulu dreams of being a working woman, but since she couldn't complete her studies, she is ineligible to apply for office jobs. But she is hopeful, vivacious and a positive person. She participates in events with full gusto and wins prizes. One day, she wins a radio contest and goes to the radio station for collecting her prize. She reads a poster about auditions of RJs and wants to try her luck. She is aggressive in her pursuit of the auditions and gets a chance to meet Maria the CEO of the radio. She wins the job by her charms and a sensual resonated "hello" becomes her signature. She is hired for a night show and life takes a turn. Ashok a typical Indian husband, oscillating between age old patriarchal values and the desire to set his wife free is initially irritated at her venturing out for this job but finally gives in for the sake of his love for her. Sulu handles a caller who tries to engage her in obscene talk very tactfully. Ashok is irritated at her singing a song which she sang only for him. He is also frustrated at his work place, whereas, Sulu

enjoys her job. Her family wants her to quit this not so respectable job, but he stands by her. Her work –home balance is not maintained and she loses on the home front when she is called by the principal of the school of her child and both the parents are shown that how the child has resorted to erratic behavior. Her sisters here once again become the agents of patriarchy and tell her to quit job in the interest of her child's future. Sulu refuses, but then the son goes missing, leaving a note behind that he is ashamed of what he did at school, and implores the parents to continue their normal life by allowing mother to work. Police traces the son, brings him back while Sulu quits her job as she is unable to handle the conflict caused by her job. She goes to the radio to quit and as she is leaving, she overhears the receptionist arguing with the Tiffin service delivery boy. That's where she stops and requests the office to give the Tiffin service contract to her. Finally, Ashok too joins her, Sulu goes to job, manages both, the home as well as her job.

Does this film pass the Mako Mori test? As the last parameter is that the arc is not about supporting man's story. *Tumhari Sulu* is indeed the story of a woman who finds a middle path to resolve the issue. However, her existence and her decisions revolve around that of her family. She finds a way out to pull her husband out of the unsatisfying job. As Sampada Karandikar opines, "The movie, in

its 70s Amol Palekaresque flick tone, subtly drives home the point of what feminism truly entails. It establishes the concept of a woman's agency, the right of a woman to portray herself as she is and not how society wants her to be, the right to not be tied down by labels. It also reinforces the belief that women should be there for other women and not undermine or shun them (like Maria does for Sulu once she recognizes her potential). Most importantly, the movie asserts that feminism is not about superiority of one gender over other, but about finding equilibrium in the societal expectations from all genders. *Tumhari Sulu* manages to do all this without making a big deal out of it." [4]

But Ishmeet Nagpal is of another point of view "Heartening as it was to have a happy ending, it comes at the cost of Sulu putting her husband's needs ahead of hers anyway. She devises a business plan for him, ironically called "Ashok tiffin service" (while surely she is the one doing the cooking?).

The movie left me with a lot of unanswered questions. Is this movie feminist at all? Is it pandering too much to the idea of *sanskari* motherhood? Is Sulu capable of doing something for herself without putting her family first?

In the end, Sulu pleases everyone-her husband, her son, her boss- and stays optimistic through all her trials. *Tumhari Sulu*

leaves you wishing you had more time with Sulu, so that maybe, one day, you could see Nobody's Sulu." [5]

Going by the two extreme views on the movie, Tumhari Sulu at one level passes the Mako Mori test as the screen space occupied by Sulu surpasses any other character but at another level it so subtly supports the story of the man that it fails the test at a finer level. Tumhari Sulu is a kind of story that best encompasses the ambivalent nature of feminism in a grossly patriarchal society. The film might have failed the tests but it certainly promises a shift towards an egalitarian society in terms of gender equality.

The UNDP goal five seems a distant dream for Indian society. But as far as depiction and representation of women in Indian women-centric cinema is concerned, it has come far from the decorative roles of women. Pro active character of Sulu, her desire to do something, goads her on to achieve her desired space in the society that is essentially patriarchal. One way of negotiating space in the male bastion is to be on their side and create a niche for yourself, that is exactly what Sulu does. She is a drop out, yet she finds ways and means to add to the GDP, she tries

to work for a equal space for herself in society and fights the stereotypical attitudes of her sisters who though educated and well placed are the upholders of patriarchal mind set. Sulu despite remaining Tumhari Sulu (translated as your Sulu) negotiates space for herself in a predominantly patriarchal setup.

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