



STEREOTYPING WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

Cinema is believed to entertain, to take the viewer to a world that is different from the real one, a world which provides escape from the daily grind of life. Cinema is a popular media of mass consumption which plays a key role in moulding opinions, constructing images and reinforcing dominant cultural values. The paper deals with representations of women characters in mainstream Bollywood movies. Women constitute fifty per cent of the population and hence their portrayal on screen is crucial in determining the stereotypes that exist in the society. The paper begins with a discussion on the field of feminist film criticism and how mainstream Hindi Cinema has restricted itself to defined sketches of womanhood. It also undertakes some glimpses from popular films to analyze this process of stereotyping. Cinema is always constructed from the male view point. In conclusion, a debate ensues on whether mainstream Hindi cinema has been successful in portraying Indian women of different shades in a society dominated by patriarchal values.

Keywords: *Bollywood Cinema, stereotypes, patriarchal*



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Since Independence, Indian cinema has gone through a lot of changes including a shift from classic mythological blockbusters to “Bollywoodised” remakes of Hollywood’s successful films. Women in the Indian film industry have played an important role in the success of individual films. Their roles however have changed overtime, from being dependent on their male counterparts to very independently carrying the storyline forward. Before referring to the changes, it is relevant to understand the importance of Indian Cinema in the world today. Films are believed to be the opium of the Indian masses as people rely on this medium to help them escape to a world of fantasy. In a very explicit way, cinema has shaped the cultural, social and political values of people of this country. 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. The feminist approach to cinema asks a few pertinent questions like how women are represented on screen, how

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women's issues are treated in cinema, what does feminism mean to film-makers, how is the women portrayed and what is the role of women film-makers and women writers in depicting women's issues through cinema. Feminist critique of cinema has helped to view the reality presented by cinema in a different way and thus has contributed significantly to the position of women. Certain underlying aspects of a popular medium can only be brought to surface by criticism, scrutiny and introspection and feminists have attempted to do it with cinema as well as with other fields of study and practice.

Feminist theory took up a distinct stance in relation to the objectification, exclusion and silence of women in cinematic narratives. It also evaluated the stereotyping of female characters in cinema.

Though there exists a body of feminist film making in Hindi cinema, the leading lady of Hindi films has more or less played defined roles which conform to the values upheld by Indian society. Women in *Bollywood* have been uni-dimensional characters; it's good or bad, white or black. There are no in between shades. This dichotomy was reinforced in popular films which 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), *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988) depicted women as passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families. In these films, though the practices of patriarchy were criticized, they were implicitly being patronized in the sense that the victim wife refuses to leave her husband's house despite severe physical and emotional violence by a rationale of leaving the marital house only at the time of her death.

How real are the women characters in Hindi films? This is something to debate about because values, ideals, principles; morals have dominated the frame-work in which these films are placed. Thus, women rather than being depicted as normal human beings are elevated to a higher position of being ideal who can commit no wrong. Their grievances, desires, ambitions, feelings, perspectives are completely missing from the scene. For eg: *Abhimaan* (1973) begins with premise of the wife (Jaya Bachchan) being more talented than the

husband (Amitabh Bachchan). This in itself is a defiance of the stereotype. However, the film crumbles from then on when the wife gives up her thriving musical career for satisfying the husbands' ego culminating to a conventional closure that demands adherence to traditional values of marriage and motherhood. *Bollywood* heroines have mostly been homely, content to stay happily ever after in the institution of marriage even if educated and keen to carve and identity of one's own. Where are the women building careers and working professionally? They have been almost silenced.

Hindi cinema in the seventies had women in different working roles (Jaya Bachchan as a knife sharpener in 'Zanjeer' and a singer in 'Abhimaan', Hema Malini as a village tonga (horse carriage) driver in 'Sholay') The working woman vanished from the popular blockbusters of the nineties which relegated Indian women to the boundary of the home. The concern boils down to the embodiment of women who stay next door, walk on the street, spend time working in office and return home after a tiring day. Where are these women in Hindi films? In an era of information overload, it is not too radical to expect some social consciousness from the cinema medium. All this while, there has been discussion about media's responsibility to the society. So why cinema should be engaged only with creating leisure for its audience and not make them think critically?

The heroine is always secondary to the hero. Her role is charted out in context of any male character which is central to the script. It may be the hero, the villain, the father, the boss, an elderly male figure etc. She is devoid of any independent existence and her journey throughout the film is explored in relation to the male character. This kind of straight-jacketing limits the women's role to providing glamour, relief, respite and entertainment. For eg: *Priyanka Chopra's* character in *Agneepath (2012)* is not of any significance to the story as such. It is only to give the audience a break from the tedious scenes of violence and drama. She is there only as a romantic partner to *Hrithik Roshan* who is busy in avenging his father's brutal murder. It is unusual to witness a strong female character in an action movie even if she indulges in some fights and punches. Where are the *Charlies Angels of Bollywood (2000)* and where can we find a character that *Angelina Jolie* played in *SALT (2010)*?

Another trend to be examined in the depiction of female characters is the clear dichotomy which is followed. The woman is docile, domestic, honorable, noble, and ideal or she is the other extreme – wayward, reckless and irresponsible. Why does *Bollywood* shy away from

taking the middle path? Where are women who are good or bad as per the situation they face in their lives? Where are the women who negotiate with troubles on a daily basis and emerge victorious? Cinema depicts woman as sacrificing her successful career to experience domesticated bliss. When the husband strays, it is the other woman is blamed. The husband is absolved of adultery and he returns to his legitimate partner i.e. the wife at the end of the story. Such a portrayal has strong moral connotations associated with it. It also shows how two women are pitted against each other to win over the same man, while he enjoys his fling openly. The woman of substance is missing from such portrayals, the women who can lead her life independently and take decisions without relying on any male. In such a scenario, women are seen to be not just physically inferior to men but also intellectually inferior. Film-makers don't take the effort to associate qualities like intellect and decision-making with female characters.

On the positive side, there are a chunk of film-makers who have reacted against the stereotypes set by mainstream cinema and have dared to explore subjects from the women's perspective. Contemporary films like *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Cheeni Kum* (2007), *Chameli* (2003), *Ishqiya* (2010), *Paa* (2009) and *Dirty Picture* (2011) have pictured extraordinary themes and portrayed women as central to the story line. These films have forced creators to take a fresh look at the different roles played by women and introspect into the kind of typecast that was being perpetuated earlier. It is also to the credit of the current crop of actresses who have not been hesitant to accept bold roles. Women have appeared in strong and independent roles which for the time being shifted the camera's focus from the women's body to her identity as an individual. Film scholar and author *Shoma Chatterji* "Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects with rarely any sense of agency being imparted to them. Each phase of Hindi cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal frame-work of the Indian society. The ordinary woman has hardly been visible in Hindi cinema. To understand this portrayal in much more depth, we need to have a look at some crucial glimpses which defined the role of women in Hindi films. These images kept alive the notions of women as upholders of traditions, family bonding, thus depriving them of any sense of power and agency.

Glimpses

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. Directors like *Sooraj Barjatya* and *Karan Johar* were at the forefront of such films. These films also appealed to migrant Indians staying abroad because through them they were to connect to their roots and culture. While women were very much important characters in these films, their identities were absent. Their roles were defined in relation to their family especially the male characters in the family. Most of these films also laid down the conditions for ideal womanhood. There is a relationship between patriarchal values and popular cinema and how such values get reinforced through this medium. Ironically though, they are never shown to be in their work place. They mostly occupy the house and the kitchen. Even though they are modern and confident women, they submit to the desires of their family and are eventually domesticated. This was an indication of an era which saw the educated and economically independent women as insensitive and uncaring thus concluding that women are successful only in nurturing roles. Her family identity dominates her professional identity. In films such as these, the homely role of the women was reinforced by use of symbols like mangalsutra, sindoor and elaborates wedding customs. The modern woman was seen as a threat to the hierarchical family structure and was hence during the course of the film transformed into a simple and sacrificing wife/partner.

In films that catered to Indian migrants, there was a clear emphasis on superiority of Indianness over western culture. The Indian was shown to be pure whereas the western was the morally degraded. This duality was established through the conduct of female characters like *Kajol* in *Dilwali Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (DDLJ)* – 1995, *Pardes* (1997) and *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* (1999). The western woman in these films was shown to be morally degraded and inferior to the Indian woman, whom the hero eventually chose. The diaspora remains intact whether its food or clothes. Families retain their Indian values at any cost. As she falls in love with his, she tries to combine multiple roles of a girlfriend, wife and mother to his kids to win his love. In *Vivaah* (2006), *Amrita Rao* is a young, docile, submissive, suppressed but ideal girl chosen by *Shahid Kapoor* for marriage. The reason for his choice is the ideal qualities

that she possesses. The hero's magnanimity is depicted in the end as he willingly accepts her after a tragic accident that takes place just before marriage.

It is necessary to understand that such portrayals find rationale in the power structures that govern Indian society. These power structures do not impart any agency to women. The inclination to portray women as ideal stems from the social and cultural context in which we reside. The pre-occupation with the ideal is what defines the goals of Hindi cinema. This ideal allows for only two types of women characters – the good who is to be idealized and the bad who is to be demonized. Most films still cannot summon the courage to shatter myths of feminine beauty embodied by fair skin, curvaceous figure and glamorous make-up.

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 eg: *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 who are able to decide their priorities. This portrayal is no mean achievement of Hindi cinema. *Astitva* (2000) has been pitched as a film which explores the unconventional, the desires of a married woman who has long been neglected by her husband. The film is a revelation in the sense that it makes a strong statement about the hypocrisy in the society. The film questions the realm of patriarchy which may not necessarily commit violence but manifest domination in other forms like denial of space and freedom and subjugation. The society needs to accept these forms as patriarchal domination and not just focus on violence. The protagonist *Aditi* (*Tabu*) emerges in the end as a strong woman with her own thoughts who rather than seeking forgiveness from her husband, chooses to walk out and live life on her own terms.

In a bid to reach the masses, popular cinema has become melodramatic and rhetorical. The presentation of extremes has been common. So, while films from the earlier era showed women as extremely submissive and docile, recent releases like *Rockstar* (2011) have resorted to heroines who are bold, uninhibited, skimpily clad, and promiscuous. This ultimately does not lead to the empowerment of the women character; it only reduces her to a prop to satisfy the male audience. The female body, the male gaze, voyeurism – all of which

popular cinema relies on are present in these item numbers. They are only an addition to the package of entertainment that the movie is supposed to provide.

Women in Realistic Cinema

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. For the purpose of specificity and clarity, *Madhur Bhandarkar's* films have been selected for analysis. *Bhandarkar's* cinema is associated with gritty realism. He falls into the brigade of contemporary Hindi film-makers who have filmed real time issues and have been appreciated for the same. His films have dealt with bold and unconventional themes like exploitation of women, cycle of poverty, organized crime, police and govt. corruption, cult of celebrity and journalism, ruthlessness of big business and industrial espionage. Majority of his films had female protagonists. 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 protagonists 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.

While *Bhandarkar's* films are an appreciative attempt to bring to us, strong female characters, he still chooses to let them be in the larger societal frame-work. His characters though give a shot at defiance; they are not made to move out of the restricted sphere of action. An analysis of other films made by him i.e. *Page 3*, *Chandani Bar*, *Traffic Signal*, *Jail* etc may bring to light the deficiencies in his portrayal.

Conclusion

It is difficult to come to a uniform conclusion on the portrayal of 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. 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 only end is not to entertain it should light the fire for social change through entertainment. As a media product, identified to accelerate the process of modernity, cinema should not stick to the just making film it should come up with more progressive representations of women. Such portrayals would do justice to women and their role in the society.

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