

Women in Bollywood

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ABSTRACT

Cinema Industry is a popular form of mass media believed to entertain. This experience helps the audience to skip to the world that is ascetically different from the real world, the land which helps them to escape from the daily drudge of life. Cinema is a popular form of art medium which plays a vital role in reinforcing dominant cultural values, constructing images and molding opinion. This research article deals with the portrayal of women in mainstream cinema "Bollywood". It is important to examine this issue as women are the large part of country's population and therefore their representation on screen is essential for determining the existing stereotypes in society. This paper will investigate about how mainstream Hindi cinema is restricted with limited defined sketches of womanhood. It will also examine about whether the mainstream Hindi Cinema has been successful in representing women's different shades through celluloid screen in a society with patriarchal values. The data collected for the research work is secondary. This study is exploratory and the method used for research is qualitative.

Keywords:

Cinema, media, women, Bollywood, movies, stereotypes, mainstream, patriarchal

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Introduction

India was first introduced to cinema in the year 1896 by Lumiere Brothers in Bombay. Dhundiraj Govind Phalke popularly known as Dada Saheb Phalke is considered as the Father of Indian Cinema produced the first indigenous film (Silent), Raja Harishchandra in 1913 and this movie enabled the rise of the cinema industry in India. By the year 1920 cinema was becoming the part of Indian society. In the realm of art, Hindi cinema falls under popular art. It depicts supports and influences the popular Indian culture. Cinema is created for masses which provide intriguing glimpses in the mainstream Indian Ideology. Hindi Cinema popularly known as Bollywood has played a major role for reference of Indian culture in the century. It has expressed the changing scenario of contemporary India in a manner that no other art form could have shaped. Mainstream cinema has played a vital role in influencing the opinion of people for perceiving various aspects of lives. It can also be said that it is not society that gets influenced by cinema but cinema acts as

a mirror of society. Hindi movies act as the mirror of social reality and provide an insight into how sexuality and gender is perceived.

Women globally and in India have excelled almost in every field and have imprinted their names globally, but still it seems to be a long journey ahead before women attains equal status in the minds of Indian men.

"Most agricultural civilizations downgraded the status and potential of women, at least according to modern Western standards and to the implicit standards of hunting-and-gathering societies. Agricultural civilizations were characteristically patriarchal; that is, they were run by men and based on the assumption that men directed political, economic, and cultural life. Furthermore, as agricultural civilizations developed over time and became more prosperous and more elaborately organized, the status of women deteriorated from its initial level."

(http://history-world.org/Civilization,%20women_in_patriarchal_societies.htm)

In the patriarchal society like India, still the cinema industry deems to portray women as in realistic world. This is good initiative as cinema is influential medium of communication and have mass appeal and at least few if not all can carry out a message to the society and try to create awareness. There is a myth that women in cinema is portrayed as a supportive character for male rather than characterizing them as the one who holds the plot framework sinuous, to serve the male position. *Women are insinuated in films as bearing the burden of sexual objectification that male roles cannot. Hence, they become the bearer, and not the maker of meaning says Laura Mulvey* (Mulvey 834). Most Indian women lead a quiet life with big sacrifices and maintain their resentment within themselves for the sake of criticism from society.

Women in Hindi cinema are born with certain expectations ranging from classis movie to contemporary blockbusters such as Sholay to the most recent Fashion that employ women as in extreme gender issues. Women in mainstream cinema is portrayed as unmarried who is always in stress/pain or hysterical feminists or simple glam doll whose main objective is just to attract the attention of opposite sex. In many Hindi movies it is a common trend to have an 'Item Number' which actually has no connection with the movie but with a hypothesis that the movie is simply connected. As Bindu Nair (2009:53)says, *'Sometimes the one song ends up making the film a hit, such as 'Chamma Chamma' from the film China gate.'* Sometimes, we see the female portrayed as a protagonist of a movie rather than being only an object of some sexual desire. A conflict between 'new feminism' and 'traditional values' occurs in some cases. Hindi Cinema mostly acts like an emotional diary and which is very resourceful while reading the portrayal of 'Women'.

For example, in the movie Paroma, woman is portrayed as a traditional Hindu wife who is deprived of her freedom and is detained by her

emotional attachment with the family. Indian women were not expected to develop their personalities or to express their emotions rather they are expected to get comfortable to their individual suppressions and surrender to the same. The movies that focus on women protagonist portray women exploring self through her body. This can be seen in the movie *Chandni Bar*. Tabu played the protagonist Mumtaz, who was forcefully sent in a dance bar to be a show girl by her own maternal uncle and she earned from performing the dance bar. She had to groove her body on the music and there were enormous men who were willing to shed their money just for one and only reason- voyeuristic desire. According to Jasbir Jain (2009:121), *this woman's body is given the penultimate magnitude in many of the films we see. And in these films the act tends to start with a rebellious nature and the instrument being their body.*

Rebellious women are represented with comedy and ridicule. This rebelliousness need not always be irrefutable or approved within the storyline structure. Sometimes it is considered as the discourse of modernity and counted as a threat to the patriarchal society through the significance of westernization, education and independence.

In *Mirch Masala* (1985), Smitha Patil (Protagonist) asks the tax collector to have water from the other side of river. She stated *"This side is where human drink and the other side is where the animals drink"*. This was an indirect statement drawn to the tax collector which referred him to be a callous animal. Through the other women ran away from the sight but Smitha Patil was standing still and reflecting that nothing can discourage her. Having said a lot of rebelliousness and rebellion, it also plays the role of a modern-day debate, in the way that it undermines the patriarchal system. This can be said the beginning of the revolutionary period that can break the conservative and stereotypical thoughts of the society.

A female protagonist, who is portrayed to be mistreated in the society, suffers a lot in her life. In other words, she is said to be the sufferer who endures the consequence. As we can recall it's still the woman who bears the brunt of all the misfortunes. They could be able to win men's hearts because of their elegance and morals but still the people seem to take that for granted.

The portrayal of men is entirely different that of women in a movie. A woman is portrayed as a victim, sufferer and she pays all the penalties in return which are countless. It will be interesting to see men's reaction of it was a reverse situation. Yet what actually happens in this situation is that even though it was unintentional, the people don't like being analyzed as anything beyond their integrity. As Anshoo Sharma (2009: 114) has rightly said, *'They vent their anger, shun the women, and make them feel guilty. They are never shown to be in a compromising position -groveling or pleading with their women.'*

Portrayal of Women on Screen

Globalization in world and especially in the media industry and change in technology like satellite, cable and online mechanism has helped people to access the media like print, electronic etc. while sitting in any part of the world. The Indian women have always been radicalized, sexualized and gendered whether it is in advertisements, films, magazines etc. This limits the portrayal of Indian women. Women in Hindi cinema are not very often represented as an English speaking and those who are represented belong to upper echelon of society and are heterosexual. This face of women is definitely not the face of millions of women in India and this also fails to portray women accurately. On contrary, in contemporary stories women from small villages are portrayed negatively. These women are represented as deeply religious, rooted to their traditions and mostly as backward cast and from the third world. The portrayal is sometimes troubling as the woman in contemporary world is modern and

liberal but the representation of village women is traditional and contrasting to what is said in Hindi cinema.

Hindi movies have been the trendsetter in beauty and sartorial matters which are almost being the standard for contemporary tastes. It is surprising that the male youngsters for the matter of courtship ape the formulae that appear to work so well for the Current rage at the box office. The Hindi cinema uses women body for variety of purposes for example visual pleasure which is a very strong element in Hindi cinema. Mulvey says, *"In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact on that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness."* Women are mostly portrayed homeless; it is their body which is her home, her possession, her present and future capital etc. Romance is no stranger for Hindi cinema but the ways to portray these relationships have changed over the years. People expect decent portray of romance but Bollywood has become more influential than Hollywood and Western media culture and this portrayal has pushed the limits for women.

Sandra Harding states that *"the self-image of the West depends on contrasts not only between the rational and irrational but also between civilization and the savage or primitive (or feminine or womanly), the advanced or progressive and the backward, dynamic and static societies, developed and underdeveloped, the historical and the natural, and the rational and the irrational, among others."*

Hindi cinema have changed and evolved over the years reflecting new trends in relations. Women in Hindi cinema live on traditional norms and are portrayed as ethical and happy. Women who don't follow these rules and regulations are punished in films and are depicted as immoral. These roles of women are reflected in a great way in Hindi cinema. Four important roles of women that are

considered major in Hindi cinema are ideal wife, mother, vamp and courtesan.

Women in Hindi cinema, ranging from cult movies to celluloid blockbusters like *Sholay* of 70's to the most recent that engages serious issues of gender continues to portray women either as damsels in distress who are rescued by knights or feminist or just simple belly-shaking glamorous dolls whose ambition in life is just to gain attention from male. Women in Hindi cinema are dumped into the quagmire of tension packed fireworks of the home-prison or are exploited by lovers or betrayers. Women have no sphere of their own, no identity and no living space for them. They go down in collective memory as organic imperfections, ramshackle, rickety, unhinged creations, mere fictional constructs of the 'fragile handle with care' male ego.

Ideal Mother

In reference with Hindi cinema the mother means someone who is religious. The country is connected with mother as goddess, who is Shakti and represents great strength. The role of mother in Hindi cinema is often portrayed as on who is strong face like *Mother India* (1957). The mother's role in Indian society has a double inheritance as it includes the mother as goddess. Mother goddess traditionally is interpreted as someone expressing power, autonomy etc. in all senses. This role conveys a message that the power of femininity is central. As ideal mother is a combination of different energies of Gods but she cannot fight any battle without any male support. Mother is caring Shakti and the actualize Gods hidden power and the epitome of that grace. She enjoys an independent status. The popular couple Radha Krishna is also portrayed in non-hierarchical relation. Kali, Durga, Saraswati, Laxmi all goddess are portrayed alone, these are the goddess who exist in herself by herself. The role of mother in Hindi Cinema is underestimated. The Indian cinema does not place the mother within a realistic setting; instead it strives to

contract this sphere into a limited area thereby turning this space into a place of isolation and confinement.

The mother's maternal character has a high influence on public life. The well-known American writer (and feminist) Charlotte Perkins Gilman has observed, "Mothers with their natural characteristics of care, nature provision and education can be shown to be ideal public administrators". They may have a powerful influence on society with their normal habit of helping, me desires or milers and also the mariner through which they bring up kids. It is possible to leverage this idea of 'social motherhood' that transcends the 'separate domain' paradigm to approach the repressions, suppressions and subjective norms of culture positively. Its 'treatment', 'nurture', 'provision' and 'education' characteristics will allow the mother character to guide administrative and social capital away from competitiveness and self-interest, thereby ding, social development and growth. It is possible to target the politics of social motherhood, promote social change and not obstruct it.

The enormous potential of mother's character could be exposed by a powerful affirmation of the mother ideal. The compassionate love, the devotion provided to their daughters by the mothers to make them into strong person or the memory of the daughter of the affection of her mother for her and the self-esteem and strength of will it has created in turn, is an area unfortunately misportrayed by Hindi cinema. The inability of Hindi cinema to stress the importance of women's inclusion in the general framework of human development and growth is its uniquely still a weak point.

Ideal Wife

Another character that is portrayed in a powerful manner is of wife in which a woman is depicted purely as woman. This profane creature is trapped in its own stereotyped role. The different norms of society always try to restrain the sovereignty of

woman as an individual. The woman in the character of wife is portrayed as sexually pure and loyal. By respecting the family and depending on the husband, she must be compatible with conventional Indian roles. She is intimately tied to the domestic sphere. In the formative years of growing up, through the socialization period, the woman learns to adhere to the tyrannies of the fraternal community at all; the mental, social and financial characters of the three layers are viewed and portrayed as morally inferior entities. The freedom from the sense of helplessness is the ideal of sovereignty.

Both male and female bonding is depicted in distinctive manner. Women are socially inferior so their bonding is depicted as someone who is aggressive to their own gender or any serious physical proximity as it was portrayed in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*. Women characters are always portrayed as divided among themselves. The cruel reality of life that the male world perpetrates makes her feel that compliance is secure and thus right. In the name of defense, physical, emotional and social, she is terrorized to abide by irrational demands. She discovers that she is a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother, a good interest in marriage, but never a good person who is at ease in her world of interests.

Vamp

In Indian movies especially Hindi cinema the vamp is contemporary and mimics Western women. Smoking, drinking, and dancing can be included in her behavior. She can be easy to fall in and out of love as well. She portrays unacceptable behavior and is seen as unhealthy. For her actions, she is almost always disciplined.

Courtesan

The courtesan, in Hindi cinema is a sort of prostitute or dancing women, who is beyond the usual domain of Indian womanhood. He portrays sexuality. She is someone who assists in men's physical and mental needs. She also offers the

man warmth and care in Hindi cinema. The powerful environmental powers of culture that are under the influence of men place a secondary role on women. They are on the outskirts of both culture and destiny, with little choice that is put in stereotyped slots. This representation of women extends not only to Hindi cinema, but to the whole world.

Christine Glendhill in her essay *Recent Development in Feminist Criticism* remarks:

"A crucial issue of Feminist film criticism is the examination of the fact that "Women as women" are not represented in the cinema, that they do not have a voice, that the female point of view is not heard. Recognition of this fact unites all attempts at a Feminist: critique of the cinema."

Despite of this type of portrayal Hindi cinema is very popular. As it consistently poses questions on viewers specifically on those who come from lower middle class and this process of questioning is done in multiple levels through different cinematic techniques and through different modes like sexist, political, religious etc. When we analyze these movies in deeper than we realize that general public has different meaning and message from these movies.

Women in 90's Cinema

The era of 90's in Hindi Cinema was one in which the genre of family drama was very popular. In this decade there were few films that were blockbuster and also reinforced the values of patriarchy in Indian Society. There were several directors who were at the forefront of these films like *Sooraj Barjatya*, *Karan Johar* etc. These movies were appreciated by the Indian who have moved to abroad as through these films they were able to connect themselves to their culture and roots. Women were very important character in these family dramas but their identities were absent. The role of women in these films was defined in relation with their families especially with the male characters of the families. Most of the movies also laid down the image of ideal

womanhood for society. There is special connection between patriarchal values and popular Hindi cinema and those values and relationship is redefined by this popular art medium.

Though these women are never shown in their work place, according to these movies their work place is their house and kitchen. Though these women are confident and modern but they compromise with their desires for their family and ultimately domesticated. This era saw the economically independent and educated women in uncaring and insensitive roles which concluded that women are more successful in nurturing roles. Women's professional identity is mostly dominated by their families. In family dramas like these the role of women are more homely and are reinforced by the use of different symbols of beautification such as Sindoor, Magal-sutra etc. Also in these movies there are many elaborated wedding rituals and customs. The modern confident and educated women were considered threat to the patriarchal society and hence in these movies women were portrayed as a sacrificing and simple wife or partner.

The films that focused on Indian Migrants (NRI's) have clear emphasis on superiority of Indian culture over western. These movies portrayed Indian as well cultured and pure while the western people were portrayed 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 important to understand that such type of portrayal finds the justification of the power structures that are governing the Indian Society. These structures don't provide any kind of help to women. The societies we reside have an inclination towards the portrayal of women as ideal stems of cultural and social context. These stereotypical portrayals of women actually define the goals of Bollywood. The women in Bollywood is accepted in two characters-

1. The good women who is to be idealized
2. The bad women who is demonized

Most of the movies still don't have courage to shatter myths of feminine beauty personified by curvaceous figure, fair skin and glamorous make-up.

Contemporary Cinema has made an effort to explore different subjects that are considered taboo like infidelity, sexuality, surrogacy, live-in-relations, divorce etc. in the movies like *Astitva* (2000), *Jism* (2003), *Salaam Namaste* (2005), *Chak de India* (2007) etc. For eg. *Astitva* (2000) is a movie that explores unconventional desires of a married women who has been ignored by her husband for a long period of time. The movie reveals the hypocrisy of the male dominated society. The movie also questions about the reality of patriarchy which may not always commit any sort of violence but manifest dominance in other forms like freedom, denial of space, subjugation etc. The society needs to accept these forms of dominance over violence. The protagonist *Aditi* played by *Tabu* in the end of the movie emerges as a strong woman with her own thought who choose to walk out from this dominated relationship and live life on her own terms rather seeking forgiveness of her husband. *Chak de India* discuss about the conflicts and the issues that a woman has to deal with when she choose to excel in her field. In this movie the field is sports. In this

movie sportswomen are portrayed negotiating with their issues and choosing their career over family. These women are not super women they are just a normal human being who are able to decide their priorities. This kind of portrayal is not a big achievement for Hindi Cinema.

In order to reach the masses the Hindi cinema has become rhetorical and melodramatic. The presentation of women and the issues and conflicts have been more or less common. While the movies from earlier era portrayed women as extremely docile and submissive, but in recent movies like *Rockstar* (2011) have portrayed women as skimpily clad, bold, promiscuous and uninhibited. This does not lead to empowerment of any female character but only reduces her to a prop for satisfying 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.

Conclusion

It is difficult to come to a proper conclusion when it comes to the portrayal of women in Hindi Cinema. It is a fact that in India women do not belong to any homogeneous group they belong to different castes, class, and religion, social and economic status and have different desires and ambitions. As a result women lead different lives and thus we cannot conclude that women on Indian Silver Screen are portrayed in an identical manner. The portrayal of women has to be sensitive to the class they belong. Movies have to be more responsive towards the perspective in which woman is portrayed. In order to abolish the current power systems, women characters should have an organisation and be able to manage their own position within this framework. In order to abolish the current power systems, women characters should have an organization and be able to manage their own position within this framework. It is time for Hindi cinema to strive to redefine women as subjects of masculine gaze.

Women's dilemmas and experiences are the need of an hour when it comes to narrating their character. Moving beyond assumptions would make a major contribution to the cause of women in Indian society. For Indian women to help them to achieve their dreams, cinema has to establish a separate and independent space for women in cinema and society as well. The only end of the cinema is not to amuse, it can light the fire of entertainment for social reform. Also the point of this discussion is not to argue about the objectification of women or exposing their bodies is immoral in movies, it is actually a personal choice of actress and directors to attract the audience. But the exposure and the sexuality that is portrayed in movies on silver screen actually carries a message for audience emphasizing on pre-existing stereotypes in society and ultimately by this portrayal adding strength to the vicious cycle of this stereotypical society. Cinema should not stick to the simple making of movie as a cultural commodity, defined to accelerate the process of modernity; it should come up with more progressive depictions of women. Such portrayals will do credit to women in society and their position.

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