

Rethinking Women in Contemporary Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

This study throws light upon the portrayal of women in Hindi Cinema. Cinema is one of the most influential and powerful mediums of mass communication and entertainment. Delineation of Women in Cinema has always been a hot subject of debate and discussion. Taking a broad glimpse of Cinema and Women, we see that right from its inception till the present day, women have been an important part of Hindi Cinema. The Contemporary period of Hindi Cinema marked a transition and became an emblem of women empowerment and emancipation. Contemporary Hindi Cinema is celebrating the diversity of woman and their multi-faceted role in society.

Key words: Hindi cinema, Contemporary, Cinema, Women, Patriarchy, Feminism.

Introduction

A fusion of several art forms, Cinema has a magnetic hold on the mind of the audience. Cinema has a wider catchment area. Since the introduction of motion picture, the world of entertainment has undergone a revolution and cinema has really become a global enterprise and reached unprecedented heights. It won't be wrong to say that the Film is motion, picture, sound, theatre and school, all packed in one and which is why it can communicate effectively to thousands of viewers. *Cinema is really a statement of life* and its documentation. The raw material of cinema is life itself. Characters depicted in films represent socio-cultural conditions of society and its political and economic fabric. In fact *Khwaja Ahmad Abbas* calls Cinema as "*People's Art*".

Portrayal of Women in Cinema has always been a hot subject of debate and discussion. As women constitutes almost half of the population and hence their correct portrayal on celluloid is very essential for breaking stereotypes that exist in our society. It is very sad to admit that our Indian Society is *patriarchal to the very core*. Here men are seen as breadwinners and the role of a woman is restricted to being a good homemaker. She is seldom considered as an individual who could play a multi-faceted role in society but **Feminism** has contributed a lot towards changing the status of women in society. Feminist Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, J.S Mill, Elaine Showalter, Alice walker, Margaret Atwood, Julia Kristeva, Betty Freidan and many such had a profound impact on society and Hindi Cinema could not remain unaffected by it.

Taking a broad glimpse of Cinema and Women, we see that right from its inception till the present day, women have been an important part of Hindi Cinema. Ever since the very first film of Hindi Cinema “Raja Harishchandra” (1913) was being made by Dada Saheb Phalke, **the need for the heroine was terribly felt**. Dada Saheb searched a lot and after much effort, a boy with slender figure and chiselled features played the female part. Later on, it was with Phalke’s second film entitled “Mohini Bhasmasur”, women entered the film world and **Durga Bai Kamat became the first female actor of Bollywood**. Then there was no looking back. In context of evolution of their roles in films, if we have a broad glimpse of Indian Cinema, from silent era till date, *we see women characters fulfilling their social obligations towards family and towards society but hardly as persons. She is pictured as an ideal mother, gentle daughter, dutiful sister-in-law, obedient wife but rarely as an individual.*

The Contemporary period of Hindi Cinema marked a transition and became an emblem of women empowerment and emancipation. **The powerful #MeToo Movement**, one of the implications of fourth wave feminism gained momentum in the industry. With this rising feminism, inclusion of more women in the writing process, as directors and choreographers, female perspective, opinions have finally begun to be explored. Such developments brought women from the margins to the centre. Contemporary films are breaking stereotypes. These films have forced creators and audience to take a fresh look at different roles played by women and introspect into the kind of typecast she was perpetuated earlier.

Methodology: The following study is Qualitative and Exploratory in nature. Qualitative analysis of some select contemporary films is done. This method provides this paper a critical

lens to study the stereotypical portrayal of women in Indian Cinema and how contemporary Cinema has portrayed women in unconventional roles. Moreover, it critiques the cinematic representation of issues like gender and its roles. Thus, this method will be used to study the manner in which femininity in Bollywood is interpreted and how women centric films try to deconstruct the concepts of reality, self, status in contemporary Hindi films.

Findings and Analysis

Contemporary Hindi Cinema is giving vent to the hidden motifs of feminine sensibilities, her quest for freedom, self-respect, dignity and her changing role in society. In earlier films, female experience was ignored and was given less importance. They were trapped in secondary roles and they handled with care the male ego but Contemporary Hindi Films are showing various aspects in the representation of women and their multifarious role in society. Contemporary Hindi films are helping us find out those patriarchal values which dominate the Indian society, controls, command the lives of women. Their contribution is significant in making the society aware of women's needs and aspirations.

To name a few, director Kundan Shah's film 'Kya Kehna' is an example of a woman's film that left many critics surprised by its box office success. **Targeting a younger audience, the film was hailed as a challenging exploration of women emancipation and empowerment.** In spite of an awkward fact that the main protagonist is in a state of motherhood as a result of pre-marital sex, still the movie exemplifies the strength of a girl, her courage to fight against patriarchal forces and nurture her child single-handedly.

Coming towards the plot of the film, Priya Bakshi (Preity Zinta) is a lovely, vibrant, spirited girl who has just completed her school and is in the first year of college. As the only daughter, she is the apple of her father's Gulshan (Anupam Kher) eye. Her mother Rohini Bakshi (Farida Jalal) and three brothers shower love and affection on her. So does Ajay (Chandrachur Singh) her childhood friend. Ajay is in love with Priya and wants to marry her but she is blissfully unaware of his feelings and considers him her best friend. In college, Priya meets the dashing Rahul (Saif Ali Khan) who is a spoilt brat and a womanizer. She falls prey to his belief, fake love and gets pregnant and then follows her long battle to bring her unborn kid into this world. Kya Kehna is a Contemporary Hindi Film that exemplifies the

spirit of woman emancipation. The movie has Umbrella themes- Morality, Family, Motherhood, Marriage, need for Self- independence and respect of women.

Looking at the movie from a feminist perspective, Priya the protagonist of the film rises high like a Phoenix. She is the Brave New Heroine of Contemporary Films.

Priya's outspoken nature is established in the opening scenes. When she slaps the Vice-Principal of her school on behalf of her classmate, who had been sexually molested by him earlier that day. This happens onstage at her farewell ceremony where she receives the award of "Best Student". Though for a moment, everybody is shocked but then her brave, courageous act is rewarded.

"Maine jo kiya hai, mujhe uska koi pachtawa nahi hai. Hume apni teachers ki izzat karni chahiye, unka aadar aur sammankarna chahiye. Lekin yeh aadmi, hamare teacher banke layak hi nahi hai..... Aur aaj jab inhone meri saheli ke saath bhi yahi karna chaha, Tab hum sabne faisla kiya ki ab hume hi kuch karna padega. Mei janti hu ki iska anjam bahut bura hoga. Shayad mujhe blacklist kar diya jai. Kissi bhi college mei mujhe admission nahi milega. Aur mera career hamesha ke liye barbaad ho jayega. Lekin maine wohi kiya joh mujhe karna chahiye tha. Aur aage bhi mei wohi karti rahungi .Zindagi bhar." (Priya)

(Translation in English)

"I have no regrets for what I have done. Teachers are to be respected I know .But this man isn't fit to be a teacher. The whole School knows about his scandals. On some pretext or the other he calls innocent girls into his office and he tries to take advantage of them. Today he tried to molest one of my friends. So we decided that we have to do something. I know I'm going to face dire consequences. I might be black-listed. I may even be denied admission to any college and then my career might be ruined forever. But I have done what I should have done and that's what I will always do all my life" (Priya)

She is not shown dumb, passive but unreserved and willing to speak and stand for what is right. She can be given the synonym of 'Brave New Heroine'. As a contemporary film, the movie not only celebrates women's quest for dignity, love and respect but also glorifies Motherhood. In the movie also, the concept of single motherhood is also suggested.

Lajja is 2001 movie directed by Raj Kumar Santoshi. Inspired by the ideas of Feminism and describing the plight of women in a male dominated patriarchal framework, Lajja satirises the honour in which women are placed in society and the restrictions imposed on them. **Ironically, the four women pertaining to four stories in the movie Maithli, Janki, Vaidehi and Ramdulari are all versions of Goddess Sita, the ideal Hindu Woman's name. . Lajja is undoubtedly, a feminist cult film and one of the best #Me Too movies. It depicts in myriad shades the struggle of women in India.** In fact, decades before the #Me Too movement began, Lajja, a great Bollywood epic had become the voice for the unending struggles that women face in India. These four women along with other females are victims of male chauvinism, marital abuse, downright disgusting hate and violence against being women. However they are fighting for their rights and dignity against the social norms and injustice as depicted within the script numerous times throughout the film.

Looking from the feminist perspective, Santoshi's first Sita – the main protagonist of the film *Vaidehi is a loyal and caring wife*. The literal meaning of Vaidehi is one who gets the body from the Earth, played in the movie by Manisha Koirala is highly sensitive and moral woman. In the movie, *she shows courage, conviction and great patience*- all emblems of women emancipation. After revealing the real psyche and extra- marital relations of her husband, she no longer wants to stay with Raghu. She turns decisive and assertive. When she discovers about her pregnancy, she decides to shoulder independently the responsibility of both Father and Mother to her unborn child. She needs no compassion and financial or emotional support of her own parents and in-laws. *Santoshi's next Sita - Maithli is a brave woman*. At the start of the wedding, we get an idea that Maithli wants the marriage but as time passes, we can see that she is doing it to please her family traditions and honour of her father. The moment she sees her in-laws demanding opulent gifts and heavy dowry, the wedding which was supposed to be a gala event for her becomes a painful event where she feels her father's pain, trauma and predicament. Moreover when her in-laws put allegations on her character, she could not bear that. Finally when they increase the dowry amount, Maithli breaks, cracks and ends the wedding before the final vows could happen. Her reply to such male chauvinist behaviour is: "I won't be quiet. This is the end". She gives prominence to her self-identity, respect, integrity of character thereby refusing the man who could not honour her virtues and protect her.

Santoshi's next Sita- Janki is a theatre artist and a strong minded woman. She is pregnant though unmarried but she has faith in her lover. When the Father of Janki's child asks her to have an abortion because he doubts her and also he has been persuaded into believing traditions, she is angered. To Janki, he is judging her character. So instead of the theatre performance, she moulds the script and speaks of her heart in front of the audience against the abuses women are inflicted with. *Santoshi's next Sita- Ramdulari*, attractive but a mother figure for the village is a midwife. She is a woman believing in education and progress. She educates the women in the village, helps them to become financially independent. She fulfils all duties of her husband in her absence. Her character is highly inspiring. Rekha epitomizes the new- woman emerging from the backwaters of the vast rural landscape of Uttar Pradesh. She is progressive, pragmatic and forward looking. She hates and shuns female infanticide. She hates and shuns female Infanticide. She leads her own cooperative society, educates fellow women to become economically efficient- all symbols of women empowerment.

English Vinglish was directed by Gauri Shinde in 2012 starring Sridevi, Adil Hussain in the lead roles. The movie is a courageous tale of Self-exploration of Shashi (Sridevi), the protagonist of the film. **English Vinglish is a transformational journey of Shashi in her quest for self-respect and esteem.** Coming towards the storyline, Shashi Godbole is an Indian homemaker, who runs a small business of making and selling laddoos. Here itself, the role of a woman, the work she puts in as a wife, mother are reduced to a mere duty and only her entrepreneur job is portrayed as being some worth in the eyes of the family. Her husband Satish and daughter Sapna have taken her for granted. Her daughter is embarrassed about her mother's minimal knowledge of English and does not want Shashi to go to school. Her husband mocks and proclaims that she was born to make laddoos. Satish expects her to have his breakfast ready and she Shashi's is ready to warm his bed by night.

Shashi's older sister Manu, who lives in New York City, invites Shashi's family to her daughter Meera's wedding to Kevin. It is decided that Shashi will fly to New York five days prior alone to help Meera with her wedding preparations. Shashi is a *strong-determined woman*. In the first half of the film, we see that she becomes a butt of ridicule in the eyes of her daughter and husband. After her daughter's rude and disrespectful behaviour at her parent teacher meeting, she feels very disturbed and tells her mother-in-law

"Fail toh mei ho gai" (00.16:55)

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“I am Failed” (English Translation)

But instead of sobbing, she secretly enrolls herself in the English speaking class and works hard to gain fluency in English. As a feminist cult film, the movie gives vent to Shashi’s dilemmas, aspirations, fears, sensibilities, quest for self-identity. As a woman too, she wants that kids should give her the same respect and recognition as they give to their father. She believes it is every women’s right to get dignity and respect from family. The moment her daughter starts mocking over her bad English and insults her on varied occasions, she feels insulted. *She wants no compromise with her self-respect.* The speech which she finally delivers shows her confidence and ability to fight against all odds that are detrimental for her self-esteem.

Nil Battey Sannata internationally released as *The New Classmate* was directed by Ashwini Iyer Tiwari in 2015 Starring Swara Bhaskar, Riya Shukla, Ratna Pathak Shah and Pankaj Tripathi in the prominent roles. As a feminist cult film, the movie describes the struggle of a woman and her right to dream and change her life irrespective of social status. It portrays beautifully the dreams of a widowed mother about her only daughter and her fight using the limited capabilities to achieve the same. The movie explores the relationship between a mother and a daughter. Unlike traditional films, *the main protagonist of the movie is a heroine and the plot of the film is women-centric. Chanda’s character exudes optimism, hard-work and modern day women’s multi-tasking.* She is an emancipated woman. Working in a shift in shoe factory, a masala godown, washing clothes at dhobi ghat, she tries to earn much for her daughter’s education as she understands the value of dreams and empowerment is possible only through education. Her character shows spirit, drive and endless optimism.

With a scenic view of the Taj Mahal, Chanda motivates Apu to follow her dreams.

“tujhe pata hai fail hone mei koi burai nahi hai. Burai hai toh bina koshish kiye haar manane mein. Ek baat hamesha yaad rakhna lalli, tera sapna sirf aur sirf tera hai. Tujhe pata hai zyada se zyada log tere sapne par hassenge, unhe bhaad mei jane ko kehiyo..... bas apne sapne ko apni nazro se dur mat hone diyo”

(Translation in English)

“You know, there’s nothing wrong with failing. What’s wrong is admitting defeat without trying. Always remember one thing. Your dream belongs only to you. Lot of people will laugh

on your dream. Tell them to go to hell. Nobody can shatter your dream. Just don't let your dreams out of your sight"

A few years later Apu attends her Union Public Service Commission Civil Service exam interview and passes it successfully with flying colours. After being asked what inspired her to apply for the exam, she answers her mother was her inspiration, who now tutors struggling maths students for free. The interviewer asks Apeksha Sahay:

"Aap IAS kyu banna chahti hai. Kyuki mein Bai nahi banna chahti thi".

"Why do you want to become an IAS Officer? Because I do not wanted to be a maid"

(Translation in English)

Secret Superstar was directed by Advait Chandan in 2017 and stars Zaira Wassim, Meher Vij and Aamir Khan in the lead roles. The film deals with social issues like Gender Equality and domestic violence. The film received positive reviews from critics and became one of the most profitable films of all time. The movie is a feminist film. It motivates us to stand up against oppression of any kind; may it be domestic violence or other heinous crimes related to women. The movie celebrates gender equality and suggests that daughters are special. They are in no way less than men. Secret Superstar is the story of Insia Malik, a 15 year old teenager who aspires to be a singer. She shares a great bond with her mother Najma who is a victim of domestic violence. As a wife, she appears to be weak but as a mother, she is very strong. The movie is a tribute "to Mothers and Motherhood". Insia tells her mother:

"Pehle Kehti ho ki so jao. Phir Kehti ho ki Sapne mat dekho. Sone jaoungi Toh kya automatically sapne nahi aaeyenge aur Ammi sapne dekhna toh basic hota hai. Itna toh sabko allowed hona chahiye. (Insia) Ek line mei bata kya chahiye tujhe.(Najma).. Ammi hum chahte hain ki saara world hamari Awaaz sune"

(Translation in English)

"First you say I should sleep. Then you say do not dream. When I will sleep, dreams will automatically come and Ammi, everyone has the right to dream. This much should be allowed to everyone. (Insia). Just tell me what you want. (Najma). Ammi, I want that the whole world should listen to my voice." (Insia)

When her mother sees Insia's passion for singing, she secretly sells her necklace and buys a laptop. Insia records a song wearing a Niqab so that Farooq can't find her identity and uploads video on YouTube under the name 'Secret Superstar'. Meanwhile Farooq discovers that Insia scored low in exams and out of anger he rips out all the strings from her guitar. When he discovers that Najma had sold her necklace, he beats her terribly as a result of which Insia throws her laptop from the balcony. Unlike other typical Bollywood heroines who despite bold and empowered conform to social norms and ends up as a sufferer, Insia and Najma assert their grit in the end and from being submissive and docile to strong and bold characters. Her marching out of the airport is a step that symbolises her renunciation from a loveless marriage. The bold step towards her daughter is symbolic of change. She is the secret superstar who makes her daughter realize and cherish her dreams. She has tasted patriarchal suppression so she understands the need for love, care and freedom and tries to give it to her daughter. Insia's character motivates us to believe in the notion of dreams. One should dream. It is everyone's right irrespective of race and gender. The movie motivates us to stand against oppression.

Contemporary films have depicted the spirit of new woman who is playing a multi-faceted role in society through women-centric strong portrayals. Such films are breaking stereotypes of gender and highlighting the loopholes of patriarchy. Plots are taken up highlighting the issues of feminism. Contemporary Hindi Cinema is trying to highlight the significance of individual identity for a woman and such films will surely sensitize our youth especially young boys to respect women and also have compassion not only towards their mother or sister but also towards their female colleagues and counterparts.

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