

Feminism through the Lens of Indian Cinema: A Critical Perspective

النسوية من خلال عدسة السينما الهندية: منظور نقدي



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Abstract

In most of the societies, men are considered to be the bread winner of the family. On the other hand, the female are confined to the four walls of their houses-be there the walls of their family, parents, husband or somewhere else, they are marginalised and subjugated. They are supposed to play the role of rearing children and working for the welfare of the family. This image of women can be seen in a male chauvinistic world where strict patriarchal norms are followed by the conservative and stereotyped people. But, with the passage of time, the role of female has been changed drastically as the modernisation of the world has brought a sea-change in the traditional image of women all over the world. Cinema, like literature, is the reflection of society where we across the contemporary reality reflected through movies. Indian Cinema has also presented changes in the women's image from time to time.

Key Words: feminism, patriarchal, domination, transformation, cinema, women

في معظم المجتمعات، يعتبر الرجل هو المعيل للأسرة. ومن ناحية أخرى، فإن الأنثى محصورة بين جدران منزلها الأربعة، سواء كانت هناك جدران أسرتها أو والديها أو زوجها أو في أي مكان آخر، فهي مهمشة ومقهوره. ومن المفترض أن يلعبوا دور تربية الأطفال والعمل من أجل رفاهية الأسرة. يمكن رؤية هذه الصورة للمرأة في عالم ذكوري شوفيني حيث يتبع المحافظون والقوالب النمطية معايير أبوية صارمة. ولكن مع مرور الوقت، تغير دور المرأة بشكل جذري حيث أحدث تحديث العالم تغييرًا جذريًا في الصورة التقليدية للمرأة في جميع أنحاء العالم. السينما، مثل الأدب، هي انعكاس للمجتمع حيث ننعكس على الواقع المعاصر من خلال الأفلام. كما قدمت السينما الهندية تغييرات في صورة المرأة من وقت لآخر.

الكلمات الرئيسية: النسوية، الهيمنة، التحول، السينما، المرأة.



Introduction

It is commonly believed that the term feminism is used to propound social, political, cultural and economic movement at establishing gender, justice, equality and legal rights and protection for the vulnerable sections of society. Feminists around the world radically and strongly raised voice(s) and question against all kinds of oppression, exploitation and injustice. They have attempted to change and alter the pervasive order to create a healthy egalitarian and progressive environment for the betterment and holistic growth of men and women together. Feminism, on the whole, is all about the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of sexes.

Literature is the reflection of society, and so are the movies that play a significant role in exposing the contemporary reality as it is done by literature. In the recent years, there is a transformation in the role of women as projected by Indian cinema, but mostly the field of movies has been neglected by the society. In the contemporary and traditional movies, the females have been depicted as independent, confined, confident and career oriented. As films are the reflection of social milieu prevailing around us, so in the present paper, an attempt has been made to link the changing roles played by women in movies with the contemporary situation of women in India.

There is no denying the fact that the Hindi movies are generally male centric. There is also a little space for females to grow as an independent character like males. Consequently, the role of female characters in Bollywood has been reduced to only spectacle with pretty faces objectified for their beauty. This change is a bit slow as we find the characters in Indian movies still playing their roles to attract the attention of accomplished males.

The most frequent examples of this notion can be witness in the movies Singham, Dabaang, Gajini, and Agneepath which are, more or less, male oriented and the female are merely the symbol of physical beauty and sensuality. No doubt, females are equally talented and full of merits, but they rules are restricted to in smaller and more respective roles.

In English literature where the females' role is projected as inferior, the females in Hindi cinema, too, have been portrayed in uni-dimensional characters-either good or bad, white or black, but the



audience does not find any in between shade. In Hindi cinema, we can witness the role of women according to patriarchal norms followed by different sections of the society.

The women, who were given the status of goddesses in ancient period, are also the key-concerns of some of the movies in Hindi cinema. In Bollywood, we find that many films inspired to a large extent from religion and mythology whereby the female characters were witnessed as the epitome of virtue and values, those who could do no wrong.

The early focus of the Indian cinema was on mythological stories and great Epic such as Raja Harishchandra depicted by Dada Sahab Falke in his productions. During the Indian freedom struggle, the movies were based on to reflect anger and voice of the nationalist leaders and parties raising their voice for the freedom of India.

After the independence, some movies have also projected the partition event to show how communal frenzy between the two nations was the root cause of displacement and migration of millions of people in India as well as Pakistan. It also reflected some of the contemporary social problems rampant in the society-poverty and hunger. We find that projection of the society was both desired and achievable through films.

The time period between 1950s and 1970s is generally hailed as the golden period in the history of Indian cinema when we come across the depiction of rural, but very rich and vibrant traditions of Indian society. Poverty was one of the significant issues and subject-matters of the movies which appealed the audience as it was their own state of existence depicted by the Indian cinema. In this regard, the movies like Kagaj ke Phool, Mother India, Pakeeza, Padosan and Half-Ticket are worthy of detailed consideration.

But, at the same time, another aspect, the feministic concerns, also emerged in Indian cinema with the movie Mother India by Mehboob in 1957. During this phase of Bollywood, the women were playing a significant role in movies by taking responsibility on their shoulders for the promotion of movies in the market. That was the main reason why females were assigned equally dominated role along with male actors. In Mother India, Mehboob has tried to synthesize socialistic aspects with the conventional ideals in the Indian society.



Mother India is a powerful castigation of feminine issues as it revolves around the character of Radha played by Nargis who is the wife of Shamoo (Rajkumar). When she comes to her in laws family, she finds that Sundar Chachi (Shamoo's mother) has pawned her family land in order to pay for wedding. Sukhi Lala, the money-lender, of the village, collects three-fourth of their produce as interest on the loan of 500 rupee.

In this way, most of their crop goes into the hands of Sukhi Lala as an interest. The main reason behind it is that Sundar Chachi is not educated and she does not know how to read. Sukhi Lala takes her thumbprint on the papers which she does not know how to read.

Shamoo, the only breadwinner of the family, gets one of the boulders rolls on his arm which had to amputate and very soon dies. Radha is all alone and the life for her is a big challenge after Shamoo's death, Sundar Chachi also dies. Later on, Radha's two out of four sons die in a flood, and, life becomes very hard and difficult for her.

In these adverse circumstances, Radha reminds us of Rukmini, the central character of Nectar in a Sieve who struggles against the heavy odds of life-first against the draught and then against flood. These natural calamities coupled with the loss of her husband and mother-in-law make Radha's life very challenging and hard.

Sukhi Lala wants to take undue advantage of Radha's present situation by offering food in return for sexual favour. Radha resists against these humiliations for a long time, but finding no alternate to solve the food problem and, ultimately, she decides to submit to Sukhi Lala's temptations as her family is starving. But, internally she gets a divine signal that her husband is alive, she masters enough courage and stands up with a new hope and courage. She works in her fields to repay the money of Sukhi Lala.

In the next part of the film, Birjoo (Sunil Dutt) and Shamoo (Rajendra Kumar) are projected as Youngman. Shamoo has been delineated as a responsible person, whereas Birjoo does nothing and tries to show his resentment why Sukhi Lala was taking three fourth of their harvest and production.

Birjoo has been portrayed as a person who does not have any control over his anger and finally, turns into a dacoit. He threatens to



abduct Sukhi Lala's daughter when she is getting married to some other person. But, Radha assures Sukhi Lala to protect his daughter's honour as it is the honour of the whole village and she shoots Birjoo dead when he tries to seduce Sukhi Lala's daughter.

The film opens with Radha as an old woman who is asked to inaugurate a new canal in her village. The villagers do not want anyone else to inaugurate this canal. She has been presented as a supervisor and her love can be compared to divine love.

Radha's ploughing in the fields with an expression of pain and concentration is an image of an Indian woman that still survives in the mind of every Indian. The song accompanying the scene nullifies the contradiction between the socialist working women and the traditional Indian women.

The movie also highlights how laaj is the only dharma of Indian women as depicted through Radha's character. This movie also throws light on the fact that a woman can carry these accepting beliefs as a part of her condition and can make use of them as a part of the positive ethic of fighting against adverse circumstances.

In the 1980s, the role of women changed drastically in the Indian cinema as it was the beginning of a new era of changes in the concept of females' identity in Bollywood. During this period, the women were reduced to being a glamorous element of the film dancing away trees and kidnapped, raped and killed.

Ketan Mehta's movie, *Mirch Masala* (1989) is a brilliant example of such cinematic productions. It reflects the change of role of females in Bollywood in which Sonabi, (Smita Patil) works in a chili factory during the pre-independence era in the Western part. Her husband leaves for city as he gets job in railway department. The Subedar (Naseeruddin Shah) arrives in the village to collect taxes and caught Sonabi's attention. He asks the village headman, the Mukhi, to bring her but the headman brings a wrong women.

Sonabi, next day, is stopped by Subedar while she is passing by the Subedar's camp. She tries to free herself and runs towards the chilli factory where a Muslim watchman, Abu Miyan (Om Puri) protects her and gives her shelter as well.

There is also a parallel track where Mukhi's wife, the Mukhiyan, is ill-treated by her husband. Subedar, along with the other people,



reaches the factory and kills the watchman, but Sonabi throws bags of chili powder on his face to protect her. There are also a number of scenes in the movie that throw ample light on the glamorous role of female characters- their dancing and also looking lustful, Sonabi has been portrayed in different light.

Mirch Masala is not the only movie that reflects the idea how women were lagging behind. There are several other examples in Bollywood that reflect females in more dominant roles as well. In the past, we find that in Indian cinema, body became an essential part of success of an actress. It shows how they used to spend time in gym in workout.

During 1980s it was witnessed that Sri-devi used to spend a considerable time in the makeup room. Like the hero, we find her fighting with villains in the movie, Himmatwala and defeat them. In some movies, the director used to cast two or three heroes to balance her role. Two male heroes would barely hold on their role on their when casted against her. In one of the newspaper, Show Time, she has been declared as with the title 'Is Sridevi a hero?' This shows how there was a change in the attitude of the female in the society because movies, like literature, are also the reflection of social milieu.

This is evident through the movie, Joshila released in 1990s (1989) where with Madhuri Dixit in Hum Apke Hai Kaun, we find the caring homemaker role of the women was back in trend. In this movie, she puts her own dreams ahead of the aspirations and desires of their family.

In 1990s, more significant changes can be perceptible in Bollywood as far as the role of females in the movies is concerned. Several movies were released with a complete changed idea of females in 1994, when Mohra was released with Akshay Kumar (Amar Saxena) Raveena Tandon (Roma Singh) Sunil Shetty (Vishal Agnihotri) and Naseeruddin Shah (Mr. Jindal) Roma Singh, a journalist, is the central character in the movie who works for the newspaper called Samadhan.

When she goes to jail in order to write an article on prisoners what type of problems they were facing in the prison, one of the prisoners tries to seduce her, but she is saved by Vishal Agnihotri who is accused of the murderers of his wife's rape due to which he was



imprisoned. She fights for Vishal in order to get him released from the jail and is succeeded.

Jindal kidnaps Roma and she is saved by the collaborated efforts of Amar and Vishal. In the whole movie, Roma establishes herself as a journalist only because of Mr. Jindal and at many places, she can be seen standing up to the editor by associating herself with Jindal, the owner of newspaper. If she is able to arrange vital meetings with top police officials, it is only because of Jindal's influence which is representative of gender-neutral sign of dealing what is common in any situation.

Although she is presented as an incompetent and naïve, but her body language is that of liberated women as Monica Motwani says in this connection: the heroine may have metamorphosed over the years, but she still cannot break away from the shackles of certain norms followed by conservative people in Hindi cinema years ago.

Among the 1990s movies, we can quote the examples of some movies in Bollywood where females have been depicted as a means of decoration. These movies do not portray the women as promising women who are conscious of their career. In this regard such females are a total failure.

The role of women as a homemaker is the central concern the productions in the second half of the 1990s. In such movies, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Biwi No.1* and *Dil to Pagal Hai* do not present the females as career oriented. Failing in love, females of these movies have been projected as to take up a career. This idea has been highlighted in *Dil to Pagal Hai* in which Karishma Kapoor as a dancer loses to Madhuri Dixit who is only interested in taking care of life her partner.

Sushmita Sen has been delineated as a home breaker in *Biwi No. 1*, where she takes modelling as her profession in the beginning. But, very soon she realises the situation and turns out to be the forgiving home maker and, as a result of that, Karishma Kapoor wins at the end of the movie as a wife.

Dil Chahta Hai also captures the traditional role for its females directed by young director. The females in the movies do not have their identity of own rather having identities apart from their romantic ones. In the movie, only one female has been casted as passionate



about her career, Dimple Kapadia, but she does not meet any happy ending. On the other side, Akshay Khanna finds the normal girlfriend in his life.

The impact of Western life-style can be witness on some of the female in Bollywood movies. It is because some directors came across Western culture and lifestyle, but they have projected their female characters according to traditional Indian values and conservation in their movies.

Recently the tradition of delineating the clear distinction between the heroine and the vamps, the good girl and the bad girl is another transformation in the roles assigned to women in Bollywood. It is perceptible in the movies like Purab and Paschim in which a foreign returned girl-Saira Banu, being a spoiled girl is taught a lesson by the hero.

Vamp in the movie is shown smoking, bared flesh and one who gets punishment for her wicked deeds. On the other extreme, the good are always portrayed as the decent girls. The image of an ideal daughter or wife or daughter-in law is shown in different light and shades.

The movie, Singh (2007) is a beautiful castigation of the fact how the popular cinema shows its inclination on Indian mythology by sharing the interest and values of male prejudices as we find in the depiction of male fantasies of the females. Consequently, women are presented as an angel or as a monster.

After 1990s, one finds the element of love disappearing between the vamp and heroine dressed as boldly and moved as provocatively as the bad girl of old times. Some think that it is the effect of globalisation and consumerism due to which a large number of people are demanding heroines to become more ornamental than real women.

The heroine might be presented dancing in snow-covered environment of Switzerland or Austria, but basically following the concept of the ideal women that most of Indian males fantasise about which is being the home maker.

The feminine aspect presented by Madhur Bhandarkar's movie, Corporate, Bipasha Basu (Nishigandha Gupta) in negative light. She has been presented as over confident who seeks to get rid of her past



bad experiences. In the fits of passion to be successful by hook or by crook, she is even ready to indulge in industrial in a rival company. She is shown helpless and we cannot do anything, but to sympathize her in her adverse circumstances.

The changes in women's image painted by Indian cinema are not sudden, but have been witnessed gradually. The question that arises in our mind whether films are the reflection of life or life is presented through movies is very significant and important. But, the fact remains that more or less, the movies are ignoring this reality in spite of the fact that there are a large number of females working in both sectors-urban and rural.

In Bollywood, the presentation of women shows that time is not changed for them. It can be witnessed that the roles assigned to them are still traditional although characterization is more elaborated and detailed.

On the whole, the changes in the females' role cannot be counted all good. Initially started with myth, Indian cinema projected the women as ideal Indian women, an image that the audience was thrust upon. After the disappeared image of vamp in the 1950s and 1960s, some qualities were witnessed in Bollywood.

The idea of poetic-justice in some of the movies is the main concern as it is propounded by William Shakespeare in his plays. It has been portrayed through some heroines who used to meet a tragic end after they took recourse to evil path.

The changes the females' image underwent would not have been shown on the screen. We cannot say that the females were enjoying freedom or liberation, but it was only a means to draw the attention of audience.

Commercialization also affected the role of females in Bollywood as few directors think that movies are an art form, but most of them find it as a means to collect money by any method. We cannot blame that directors only are responsible, but also those females who want to attain name and fame in shorts span of time and for that can go to any extent and limits.

Even by means of costumes and dress, the changes in the female's role have been reflected in Indian cinema vividly and clearly. There was a time during the 1970s when the entire body of the heroine was



seen covered by means of traditional Indian dresses like saree as you find the role plays by Meena Kumari, but at present it, has been replaced their wearing bikini top as the choli as is presented through the role played by Priyanka Chopra in Dostana.

It can be concluded that the earlier heroines would dress up for the hero, but now they dress up for the audience to leave permanent mark on the audience. Western clothes, the heroines generally neglect household works, but earlier the traditional heroines were more

Changes from Past to Present in Females' Image in Bollywood

From the early days of Bollywood to the projects released currently, women in Bollywood have been portrayed in stereotypes that promote inequality between the sexes. Despite the dilemma still persisting in modern-day culture, the most important question is, has the divide between men and women proved to become better or worse since the early days of the film industry.

In the Golden Age of the Indian film industry, younger women in movies were divided into two categories: "The Vamp" and the "Damsel in Distress." Damsels in Distress were considered to be the heroines of a film, but had very little to do in the actual plot. Their purpose was to be a romantic foil for the heroes and be the object, which the hero would save in the end to show his bravery and manhood. Damsels in Distress were always the moral women, representing "proper" female roles in Indian culture. They believed in the husband as the "Godly" people in their lives, they respected their elders, they were quiet and kind, and they were fiercely loyal to tradition.

Vamps on the other hand, served an equally valued purpose as the Damsel in Distress (though that value is not a high one). The Vamps were the seductresses who would momentarily take the hero's mind off of the prize and inevitable victory. This would include women in item songs and/or women who have been hired by or are romantic interests for the villains. Vamps were temptresses that were usually scantily clad and performed acts (or dances) that left little to the imagination.

At present, one important advantage women in Bollywood have today: The possibility of more power. Films like Rani Mukherji's "Mardaani" or Priyanka Chopra's upcoming "Mary Kom" biopic shows women are strong, fiercely moral, and determined individuals, who have



fascinating stories to tell the world. Women should no longer sit idly in the corner while a hero goes around beating up bad guys single-handedly.

But, this step forward also comes with a few steps back. Women might have more to do and say in some modern films, but in most, they are still treated like objects or trophies for the heroes, and they are more scantily clad than ever before. While being scantily clad is a choice that people should not necessarily judge or jump to any conclusions about, that is precisely what happens in films.

Why must a biopic like “Mary Kom” or a female-driven action movie be some of the only ways for women to be strong, fierce and likable in Bollywood films? Sure there are other films like “Shuddh Desi Romance” that depict two great female romantic leads, but even in that film the story is concocted around a man who sees the love of two women. Isn’t it about time audiences see more movies where the women in control are depicted as a positive characteristic? Isn’t it about time Bollywood likes its women?

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