

“PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN HINDI CENEMA”

Sharma Gunjan

VN Subharti Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication,
SVSU, Meerut.

ABSTRACT

*Cinema is meant and believed to entertain, to take the viewer to a world that is starkly 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. It is deemed appropriate to examine this issue because women are a major chunk of the country's population and hence their portrayal on screen is crucial in determining the furtherance of already existing stereotypes 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 the other considering that reality in mainstream cinema is constructed from the male view point. A section is devoted to discussion on contemporary realistic brand of cinema and its understanding of women.*

The issues of media, identity and gender are being discussed all over today. They have become integral to the discipline of media studies. The reason is the popularity and diversity of media as a source of mass consumption and its influence on constructing ideas and generating debate Media structures and systems have also undergone a sea change with privatization and globalization. Hence, these developments are bound to affect the manner in which media scrutinizes and covers any issue – gender being an important one.

*In this paper, there has been an attempt to examine the relationship between women and popular Hindi cinema. The explorations is limited to mainstream/popular Hindi cinema better known as 'Bollywood' because such cinema is seen to exercise widespread influence over people and enjoys mass appeal. 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 women's issues are treated in cinema, what does feminism mean to film-makers, how does the feminist agenda manifest on screen, how is the women character positioned vis a vis the male character 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 discipline of media studies as well as film studies.*

*The theory of 'Absences and Presences' was concerned with the absence of a certain type of female characters in films and the presence of the other type, which was seen to be influenced by patriarchal values. Thus **feminist theory** in its critique of films incorporated the valorization of women's experiences thereby posing a challenge to gender hierarchy as well as opening up new realms for a post-gendered future. The paper in its ensuing sections will build an argument about the portrayal of women*

in Hindi cinema based on various strands of feminist film criticism which have certainly enriched our understanding of women on screen.

Introduction to Hindi Cinema

Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture in this century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding art form could ever achieve. Entertainment and Hindi Cinema are synonymous related each other. Hindi Cinema clearly opens a most useful window onto a culture and by studying a culture one acquires deeper understanding of the customs, behavior patterns, values, arts and crafts and also the practices of everyday life of the people inhabiting that culture.

Indian cinema is the single largest medium of communication with the masses, and close to 12 million people are watching films every week in cinema houses and theaters considering that the film industry entertains an enormously large population. Now the question arises, **what and who this film industry is made of?** Bombay film industry is a male-dominated industry. Women pursuing careers within the industry are primarily either actresses or playback singers. This trend has changed in recent years with women making their mark as **choreographers, costume designers, editors and screenwriters** but their numbers are still much smaller in comparison to their male counterparts.

Women are thus very sparse in number behind the scenes of this film industry. In an industry with so few women working within it, it seems fair to assume that the portrayal of women onscreen by male directors and other male professionals will have gender biases and constraints and may not necessarily explore women's world views, perceptions and subjective realities. What roles women play onscreen is more often than not, the male director's notion of what roles women ought to be playing. This notion is based on the director's beliefs, attitudes and values, combined with what the director thinks viewers want to see. What viewers want to watch is something that conforms to their beliefs, attitudes and values, which come from the social framework within which they live, which is the same social framework in which directors, live. There has to be a consistency in the beliefs, attitudes and values of all those involved.

The vicious cycle in Indian commercial Cinema



The Socio-cultural framework, and power structures in operation in society, including religion, the Hindu religious beliefs, and the influence of Hindu epics and myths on popular culture, govern the

tastes and preferences of the audience. Both these factors determine the directors' preference. Directors and producers have to make films that address audience preference and also meet their profit margins. Audience is quite satisfied to see films that uphold their value system and conform to it, because they live in that social value system.

Changing Portrayal of Cinema & Socio-Cultural image of Women

In the context of an evolution in the roles of women in Indian films, Laxmi (1991), writes, "From the passive wife of Dadasaheb Phalke's *"Raja Harishchandra"* to the long-suffering but heroic mother-figure of *"Mother India"* to the liberated single-parent of *"Mother '98,"* it has been a rather long and challenging journey for women in Hindi cinema". In a single sentence, Laxmi traces the history of Indian films, all the way back to the silent film, *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, moving on to *Mother India* 1957 and *Mother 98* 1999, during which time women's roles in Indian cinema have changed in many ways.

A Canadian-Indian film maker Deepa Mehta and two of her controversial films, *Fire* 1996 and *Water* 2005 created a public outrage upon release, because the earlier film portrayed women in roles completely non-conforming to existing patriarchal social norms (as Lesbians) and the latter film portrayed the ills of the Hindu religion and the atrocities committed on Hindu widows in the 1940s, making a politically incorrect point. Both films stirred the anger of religious groups and resulted in riots across North India.

Fire 1996 is the story of two women who by chance are daughters-in-law of the same household, in heterosexual marriages. However, their marriage equations with their spouses are unequal and a lack of the love, affection and space they look for in their marriages, drives them towards each other. They find the comfort and space they always lacked in their heterosexual marital relations, in the love relationship that ensues between them. The whole idea of women being portrayed as making this choice angered political parties, religious groups and religious fanatics, who went about threatening to kill the director, smashing and destroying the theaters and cinema houses that dared to screen the film. The film was banned from screening in the city of Mumbai, the center of the Bollywood film industry, and the entire state of Maharashtra where Mumbai is located.

Water 2006, made by the same director, was thrown out of India even before it could be shot on location in Varanasi, a small town in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Deepa Mehta's set was destroyed and the film's cast and crew were driven out of the shooting locations by state religious factions. *Water* is a period film set in the 1940's in the pre-independence era when Gandhi's Satyagraha movement was the biggest social phenomenon in British colonial India.

During this period widow remarriage was not common. Widows were considered unlucky and a curse on society. They were sent from the homes of their in-laws and parents to special widow homes. The treatment of one such child widow who is sent to a widow house in the small town of Varanasi on the banks of the River Ganges is the essence of the story. This child widow learns the hardships of widowhood as she observes another widow in her early twenties who is also confined here. Using the "holy" aspects of religion like the town of Varanasi and the River Ganges, to bring out the negative aspects of the religion was unacceptable to society, especially the religious groups who are politically supported by different parties were able to mobilize the masses against this film.

Do these changes eliminate the typicality of roles of women in cinema?

First, while many films have been made on social themes in the realm of women's issues including dowry, widowhood, rape, etc. it is not necessary that any of these films have been blockbusters, neither have they been viewed popularly. Secondly, such films only take a superficial interest in women and their issues. This means that although they deal with social issues pertaining to women, the films do not focus on the women's points of view but rather, on how the man plays the hero in these situations and fixes them.

In this male centric society the role of women in hindi cinema started in 1920 although the first women acted in Indian films is of mixed British, European and Indian origins referred to as the “Anglo-Indians”. Since they had hybrid origins, they were deemed separate from the women of pure Indian origin. There was a stigma associated with Indian women acting and in the context of this social stigma, when Indian women began to act, directors, in order to conform to social norms might have been pressured to portray Indian women leads as characters who live within the given boundaries of society even in the films. In Indian cinema, this is probably the beginning of the idea of having to necessarily cater to audience needs and conform to existing value systems. Actresses in Indian films typically begin their careers when they are teenagers as opposed to male actors who start in their twenties. Even if the actress has completed only a decade in the industry and is just about 30 years old, though she may not have actually aged in terms of years, the industry considers the actress an “old face” and directors begin their hunt for “fresh faces”. On the contrary the male actor’s career period is much longer lasting unto his early fifties, sometimes. It is very common to see an aged actor in his fifties playing the male lead, opposite a female lead of 19. However, if slightly older female leads are cast opposite younger male actors, the actresses are criticized by the press, industry and audiences of having lost their “youthful charm”, because the audience likes to see young women in the lead, who is attractive to the male lead and performs sensuous song and dance sequences. This a imitation of our society people likes to see the beautiful and the glorious part of the female and in exposing this part the actual image of women is being missed somewhere.

This indicates the male centralism and bias not only in the minds of those who make films but also the viewers who have been conditioned over years to view characters in films from this point of view. Patriarchal Indian society views young women as being sensuous and sexually appealing and older women as being less attractive. This is the male fantasy in operation which expects the female lead has to be young and in her prime, while the male lead can be in his early fifties and yet pass for a young hero/protagonist in his late twenties and early thirties.

Deliberation of Women in Hindi Cinema:

The narratives of Hindi cinema have undoubtedly been male dominated and male centric. Themes have been explored from the male audience’s point of view. 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. Chronicling the male’s experiences, dreams, stories, revenge, angst, ambitions etc has been the essence of Hindi films. In the action genre of films popularized by the likes of *Akshay Kumar, Sunny Deol and Sunil Shetty*; the heroine is abruptly placed in the romantic track as a distraction for the viewer from monotonous bouts of violence.

In hindi cinema 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)*, *Dirty Picture (2011)*, *Kahaani (2012)* and *Gulaab Gang (2014)* 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 type cast 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. Actress like *Vidya Balan* (Paa, Dirty Picture, Kahaani, Ishqiya) In Kahaani Vidya Balan takes on her role with power and pride and Madhuri Dixit (Mrityudand, Lajja, Aaja Nachle, Gulaab Gang). First-time director Soumik Sen, who has also written the story and screenplay besides composing the music, taps into time-honoured conventions of commercial Hindi cinema to spin a good-versus-evil yarn where both the 'hero' and the 'baddie' happen to be fire-spewing women. Another actress *Konkona Sen Sharma* (Page 3, Wake Up Sid, Life in a Metro, Mr. and Mrs. Iyer) have led this change of direction. Other actresses like *Jaya Bachchan*, *Smita Patil*, *Shabana Azmi* and *Nandita Das* have also 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. Such actresses have challenged the norm. Film scholar and author *Shoma Chatterji* (*Subject: Cinema, Object: Women, 1998*) says, "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.

Conclusion

It is difficult to come to a uniform conclusion on the portrayal of celluloid women. Considering the fact that women in India are not a homogenous group – they belong to different religions, castes, class, and 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. Films 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 dilemma 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 is a highly impressionistic medium and it is important for this medium to be an instrument that enables people to think differently and empathize with alternative perceptions of reality. Cinema's only end is not to entertain. It must begin a quest for social change through entertainment. As a media product, identified to accelerate the process of modernity, cinema should not stick to the "formula film" it should come up with more progressive representations of women. Such portrayals would do justice to women and their role in the society.