

Portrayal of Women in Different Eras of Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Since its origin in 1913, Indian cinemas have been an important medium and most influential and powerful tool in molding opinions, constructing images, and reinforcing dominant cultural values in Indian society. The Indian movies have been a vital medium to communicate social insights and conditions, while continuing to function as an important mode of entertainment to the masses (Gupta & Gupta, 2013)¹. The most powerful medium of communication in Indian society, as pointed out by Butalia is commercial Indian cinema (Butalia, 1984)². The present paper is an attempt to discover the representation of women characters in different eras in mainstream Indian Hindi cinema. It is witnessed that the representation of women in mainstream Hindi cinema has undergone a sea change during 100 years of its history. The central point of discussion of the present paper is as to how the portrayal of women in the movie has been changed from a submissive and docile woman to a vamp in 1960s-1970s and an item song girl in contemporary Hindi cinema. The present paper intends to take into account the portrayal of Indian women in different shades in a society dominated by patriarchal social order.

Keywords: *cinema, docile, item song girl, representation, women.*

INTRODUCTION

Since its origin in 1913, the Indian mainstream cinema has made a significant contribution to the socio-cultural modernization process of largely illiterate, poor, caste-ridden feudal Indian society. The projection of women in mainstream Hindi cinema has undergone a considerable change. In different eras of Indian cinema, women have been represented in the movie in different shades. The movie 'Acchut Kanya (1936) brought out the issue of falling in love with a lower caste woman. In 'Mother India' (1957) mother was portrayed as a self-sacrificing Indian mother. The movie showcased the mother as an allegory for respectability and sacrifice (Sarkar, 2013)³. The movie transcends its time by promoting the idea of equality in male and female characteristics by depicting Nargis as a nurturing yet one with valor (Chakravarty, 1993)⁴. This cinema brought to the surface the social evils like extortion, poverty,

illiteracy, and vices of money lending before the policy makers.

In 1960s and 1970s, the representation of women in mainstream Hindi cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, had witnessed a fundamental change. Song and dance sequences in popular Hindi movies demonstrated affiliation with the use of lurid elements in costumes, music, and lyrics which became rampant with an increased sense of fashion, style, dance, and thrill. During this period of Indian cinema, the women were portrayed as vamp (attractive, dangerously flirtatious women) Helen and Bindu. The Helen factor in the film of 1960s and 1970s and her projection in rebellious sexual appearance in cabaret songs by the film-makers were primarily meant for marketing of the spectator. But one thing is clear the projection of women in such style also gave credence to the importance of women's role in Indian cinema. The drama queen Helen by her plot-driven songs with vulgarity, transformed the texture of earlier movies of 1950s and also of before that. Songs such as Piya tu ab to aa ja (Carvan 1971). Aaj Ki Raat, Kaam Nehin Sharaab Se (Aag Aur Daag 1970), Har Raat Chaatee Hu Chupke Se (Beenam 1974) was the songs that changed the course of melody and music on the one hand and submissiveness and docility of women in the Hindi movie on the other.

In 1980s, a wave of realism came in Indian Hindi Cinema which persuaded spectators to believe in the expression of truth. On the other hand, some alternative cinemas were produced in this era that argued for marginalized sections of Indian society-Kranti, Aakrosh, Karz, etc. In 1990s, family-oriented films were made, which went on to become blockbusters and appealed to the migrant Indians living abroad. These films reinforced the patriarchal values of the Indian society-Kuchh Kuchh Hota Hai, Hum Apke Hain Kaun, Dil to Pagal Hai, Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge. During and after 1990s, a tremendous change took place in mainstream cinema in the form of item songs, the physical demographics of the female body, exposing dresses, voluptuous bodies, sensuous remarks, inviting gestures were projected, and item songs by item girls were introduced in the Hindi Cinema. The vulgarity and sexuality are the representation of the bodies of 'item girls' has become one of the most important features of the movie to attract the audience. The item girl invariably appears in the film, yet she doesn't contribute to the plot of the film, neither does she ever



meet the hero outside the realm of an item song (Shreshtova, 2011)⁵. Item girls like Malaika Arora, Mallika Sherawat, Sunny Leone, and their demonstration as item girls attract the spectator very much. Not only item girls but heroine like Madhuri Dixit, Katrina Kaif,

MATERIALS & METHODS

The Indian cinema has not remained an important topic on the agenda of academic discourse. As a result of that, there is a dearth of materials on this subject. However, there are some scholars who have been engaged in research on Indian cinema from their own perspective. Indisputably, films and cinemas are the most commonly used mass media to communicate with the public at large. As pointed out by Jain and Rai, cinema is a mediator of social realities, and personal dreams, collective concerns, and individual aspirations make it assume a seminal dimension as a humanistic discourse that has the potential to redirect the cultural and material fabric of our everyday lives (Jain and Rai, 2002)⁶.

The Indian film industry observed its 'Golden Age; what really distinguishes the new Indian cinema is a definitive set of liberal-humanitarian values, embracing progressive submission to urgent problems, sensitivity to the plight of the poor and oppressed. Drawing its inspiration largely from the neo-realists, it is the cinema of social significance and artistic sincerity (Raina, 1981)⁷.

So far the representation of women in Indian cinema is concerned, it is to be stated that Film scholar and author Soma Chatterjee in her book 'Cinema, object: Women 1998' says, "Women in Indian 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 framework of Indian society. The ordinary women have hardly been visible in Hindi cinema".

In view of the above-stated facts, the present paper has its own design to study the status of women in different phases of mainstream Hindi cinema. The paper aims to discover the contribution made by women actresses of Indian movies to make a shift from submissive and docile personality to more confident to buttress the idea of equality with man.

The present paper is based on the hypothesis that women actresses in mainstream Hindi cinema have paved the way towards the confidence-building measure of Indian women. The treatment of the issues of the present paper is primarily based on observation of films and the philosophy and ideology of film makers. Actress like Vidya Balan in the movie Paa, Dirty Picture, Kahani, Ishqiya was central to the storyline, and these movies moved around her. Similarly, Jaya Bachhan, Smita Patil, Shabana Azmi, and Nandita Das have also appeared in strong and independent roles, and the focus of the camera was shifted from the women's body to her identity as an individual. Such actresses have changed the direction and challenged the patriarchal norms.

Aishwarya Rai, Urmila Matongkar have also performed item songs on certain occasions in films. Thus a fundamental change was witnessed in the projection of women in the film.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

The space of the 'night club' and the 'Vamp' vis-à-vis Hindi cinema, gradually disappeared with the fading of stylistic cinema, thrillers, and suspense, and its later proliferation of domestic and family drama in Hindi cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is very important to mention at this juncture that the Hindi movie 'Abhiman' (1971) was the first movie that begins with the premise of the wife Jaya Bachhan being more talented than the husband Amitabh Bachhan. This movie made a good deal of impact on women of Indian society. This period also depicted women in more assertive role-like Jaya Bachhan as knife sharpener in Janzeer, Hema Malini Tonga Wali (Horse Carriage) driver in Sholay, general manager of a company in Trishul, Rakhi as company secretary in Trishul, and doctor in Kala Pathar. This development resulted in a wave of realism in Hindi cinema in 1980s as this development was termed by Wood as the 'Indian New Wave' (Wood, 2000). During this period of Indian mainstream cinema, the women were also depicted with the villainous role as mother-in-law or sister-in-law in the family drama of the early 1980s.

In 1990s, with emerging trends of globalization and interconnections of countries and continents in the field of information technology and communication, education, ideas, media and culture, trade and business, movement of goods and individuals from one country to another made an important impact on the film industry. With these developments and the development of people in their outlook, living standard, thinking, food habits, dress materials, and their connectivity with the world at large through the internet, Facebook, Google, etc. changed their behavior pattern and likes and dislikes, which became instrumental in changing the traditional path of film making. As a result, as Ranjani Mazumdar illustrates her meticulous work on the design of the cinematic frame that includes multiple urban spaces in the performance with the voyeuristic pleasure of lead heroines like Raveena Tandon in the song Saher Ki Ladki (Rakshak, 1995) or Karishma Kapoor in the song, Sona Kitna Sona Hai (Hero, 1997) shot in India and abroad (Mazumdar, 2005)⁸. In the decade of 1990s, family drama was popularized. Most of the films became blockbusters and reinforced the patriarchal theory of the Indian society. These films also have a powerful impact on migrant Indians staying abroad in terms of the cultural tradition of their native Indian society. Kajol in Kuchh Kuchh Hota Hai, Madhuri Dixit in Hum Apke Hain Kaun and Dil to Pagal Hai, Jaya Bachhan in Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham, etc. talked about family bonding fostering values like love, care, discipline, obedience, etc. (Shendurnikar, 2012)⁹.

In 1990s, after the emergence of the forces of liberalization and globalization, the framework and texture of mainstream Hindi cinema have changed. As pointed out by Vasudevan, the emergence of a few genres such as the

gangster genre in 1990s and post 2000 have predominantly acquired economic success in the Bollywood industry (Vasudevan, 2010)¹⁰. The gangster genre provided context to the item songs as a category. The item girls invest their creative energy to enunciate their performance. The body images they demonstrate are lewd, vulgar, bawdy, and they tend to seize moments of 'androgyny' in the verbal discourses, while vaunting their swinging full busts and hips (Kaur, 2011)¹¹ to attract the spectator. The item songs are not only performed by item girls like Mallaika Arora, Mallika Sherawat, and Sunny Leone but also by the heroine of high stature. Madhuri Dixit, a famous actress in the cult song 'Choli Ke Pichhe Kya Hai' (Khalnayak, 1993), Aishwarya Rai, Kajrare, Kajrare (Bunty or Bubli, 2005), Kareena Kapoor's, Yeh Mera Dil Fevicol Se (Dabang-2, 2012), Urmila Mantongkar, Chamma, Chamma (China Gate, 1998), Katrina Kaif, Shila Ki Jawani (Teesmar Khan, 2010) gives ample testimony to the fact that the heroine has also demonstrated their performance as item girls like the professional item girls.

In this way, it is found that the character, images, performance, depiction of women in mainstream Hindi Cinema have been changing in different eras of Indian Movies. The one aspect, which has come to our notice, is that the women have also made their presence felt in Hindi cinema. The greater participation in mainstream cinema, their performance in the lead role, their boldness in their performance have made a corresponding impact on women of Indian society.

CONCLUSION

The present study effectively demonstrates the presentation of women in mainstream Hindi cinemas that have projected women in 100 cinematic histories of India. Secondly, the study also examines the depiction of women from a submissive and docile character from its origin up to 1950s and depiction of women as vamp and dancer girl in cabaret in 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a change in the projection of women as an individual, and this development was put forward by Jaya Bachhan, Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil. In recent years,

Vidya Balan has also presented her personality as a woman in the movie like Paa, Dirty Picture, Kahani. The most important contribution of mainstream Hindi cinema has been the impact on Indian society and especially on women. It is because of the fact that the women actresses have demonstrated the personality of a woman. They actively perform the role from a shrewd politician to a bold journalist to a sex worker or a successful entrepreneur. This role of Indian females in Indian cinema has made a significant impact on society. Now the role of women characters began to be strong as that of the male protagonists. Even the item girls have made an impact by demonstrating their personality, which, in turn, emboldened the young girls of the society. It is also noticeable that women characters have marched ahead to dismantle the existing power structures as well as be able to negotiate their own position within the structure.

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