

Representation of Women in Realistic Cinema

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Abstract

The proposed study is an attempt to examine the representation of women in realistic cinema. The study will focus on how women were presented and misrepresented in cinema. Based on feminist film theoretician, Claire Johnston, further analysis is developed on the idea of how feminist theories like counter cinema can be related to realistic films. This study will explore on how with changing times, women-centric movies started gaining popularity. Realistic films helped portray women to play strong and challenging roles and in addition to this, they have been able to make a mark in the mainstream cinema. This study will also briefly discuss how realistic cinema is different from popular cinema or popular cinema.

Keywords: Realistic cinema, Feminist, Counter cinema.

Introduction

Indian cinema has completed a glorious era, which includes some of the marvelous productions that are recognized worldwide. The industry has given many box office hits and bagged some of the best prestigious awards that created milestones in the history of Indian cinema. It has always entertained the public with its various forms of dance, music, drama, thrills, romance and action. It has gained so much popularity around the globe that the Indian film fraternity like *Amitabh Bachchan*, *Subhash Ghai*, *Muhammad Rafi*, *Lata Mangeshkar*, *Meena Kumari*, *Rajesh Khanna* and many more cannot be overlooked while describing about the history of Indian cinema.

It is considered as a powerful medium that has the capability to create responsiveness about various socio-economic exertions in the society. It is a popular mass medium which

helps for information, form opinions and also reflects cultural values. Cinemas like *AlamAra*, *Mother India*, *Do Bigha Jameen*, *Lajja*, and others have not only documented the social order and life of the people of the region but also ingrained in them the significance of better life and society. Thereby, it has managed to play a very important role in documenting time and society.

The world cinema has elevated to a stage, which had created an altogether different phase of technological advancement which was not possible in last few decades. In spite of these developments, filmmaker often uses the same old story contents. One among them is the adoption of the traditional gender stereotype concepts in films to present viewers with characters that can be easily recognizable.

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What it reflects is the dominant patriarchal ideals that effectively reinforce the stereotypes and present them as 'natural'. The role of the man in the cinema has been established as the masculine hero who happened to be the dominant role of a protagonist in the film, while women have been portrayed in a stereotypical image such as the housewife, sister, mother or a loved one. They are always the secondary characters in the film compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, male becomes the central character in most of the films. While the female assumes a passive role as the objects of pleasure whose role in the structure is that of being looked at.³ In *Agneepath (2012)*, Priyanka Chopra's character is not of any significance in the story as such. Her character in the film was basically to serve for a relaxation 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. In Hindi cinema, the man is always the hero or the savior and women being the victim. When the heroine is in trouble, she needs to be rescued by the hero. Another example from the film, *Ra-One (2011)*, the poster of the film clearly depicts the hero (*Shahrukh Khan*) carrying the leading lady character, *Kareena Kapoor* in his arms. It builds up his image as her savior, something which the film's story too follows. (Gender Reflections in Mainstream.²³

Film and the Social Construction of Gender

Gender construction is the way of creating the gender differences that exist in every society. What it defines is the creation of masculine and feminine that has occurred and is occurring in a society. Since society grows and changes, definitions of gender also start to change. Judith Lorber in her essay, *The Social*

Construction of Gender conveyed many of her ideals about the contemporary conceptions of gender. Lorber gave her opinions on the roles of physiological differences of the male and female bodies, but she also elaborates on the roles of the mass media and professional sports among other things. She therefore describes about the two separate classes or genders that have been created by the society, which she explained as men and women. As a man, he had to play the role as a provider in family or in a society. There were some men who did not allow women to work. In fact, since birth these two genders have definite sets of rules and regulations that are made by the society. This is what we also find in Simone de Beauvoir's (2001) feminist classic, *The Second Sex* which states that '*distinctions between men and women are more social than natural*'.

Focusing on the cinema, where Laura Mulvey in her essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, described about the sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. She elaborates about the inequality between man and woman.²¹ The male gaze, the activities of the male looking is determining for women, it is as though women exist in order to satisfy the desires and pleasures of men. As such, women are Mulvey claims as 'styled accordingly' (Rushton & Bettison, 2011).

The stereotypical portrayal of women in Indian cinema is mainly due to historical and cultural reasons (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 2004). Internationally renowned actress Tannisha Chatterjee feels that crisis of feminine commodification has gone from bad to worse in recent years. In her statement she has mentioned, "*Bollywood doesn't treat women with dignity. Having said that, I insist no moral*

policing should happen. But we as artistes should not carry on with the heaving and thrusting as things that audiences want."

Filmmaker Reema Kagti, who lately portrayed Rani Mukherjee and Kareena Kapoor as strong assertive women in *Talaash*, admits that Bollywood films are commodifying women.¹² Actress Jessica Chastain, addressing gender inequality in Hollywood, says being the only girl on a film set, one can feel like a "sexual object". The 39-year-old actress says gender equality is important so that chances of someone feeling bullied or humiliated are less, reported *People* magazine. *"When you have both genders represented, then you have a healthier point of view. You don't feel a hierarchy; you don't have anyone feeling like they are being left out or bullied or humiliated. Sometimes, being the only girl on a set, you can feel like a sexual object,"* She said (PTI, 2016).

The best example for social construction of gender is the movie *'Tomboy'*, where *Laure* (girl) who later turns to *Michael* (boy). The film is about a 10-year-old girl named *'Laure'* who tries to be like a boy and play games like football, which therefore constituted to be a manly game. The film opposed the social construction which Judith Butler in her essay *The Social Construction of Gender* described that one play to the sexual identity, which is the game. In the film, *Laure* eventually falls in love with another female character in the film. Since *Laure* plays the role of a boy who disguises herself and tries to play the role of a big brother who protects his little sister. She wears shorts and t-shirts until and unless her mother forces her dress to wear to disclose the truth. This explained Butler's theory that sexual gender is a social construct. This film shows the social dimension of sexual identity and also shows the sexual identity as a game.

Changing Image of Female Component in Cinema

With the initiatives of the women's movement and the process of economic liberalization, there were increased projections of woman in different media sectors and the discrimination against woman in media has a different perception. Work and making money is no longer limited to man and the idea of woman working outside the home.

Hollywood started to come up with more women-centric movies where the characters are bold and independent. New and challenging characters were being played by the actresses. In 2000, few women-centric films like *Erin Brockovich*, which is about an unemployed single mother turned a legal assistant who single-handedly brings down a California Power Company accused of polluting a city's water supply. Similarly, in *North Country* which is about a woman who endured a range of abuse while working as a miner filed and won the landmark 1984 lawsuit. Based on the real-life experiences of *Kathryn Bolkovac*, *The Whistle blower* is re-enacted depicting the character of a Nebraska cop, a peacekeeper in post-war Bosnia. In the film, the story narrates how she had to experience obstacles in order to uncover a dangerous reality of corruption and human trafficking. In these three films, women in the lead role are highlighted and given more inclination as a strong character which broke the stereotyped concept of earlier films.

The portrayal of women presented by the Hindi cinema has seen certain changes. Women still play the role as a wife or a mother, etc., but the presentation has changed. The film industry is essentially male-oriented where women have little space to become independent and central character. Directors like Satyajit Ray, Rituparno

Ghosh, Basu Bhattacharya, Hrishikesh Mukerjee, Hritwik Ghatak, Madhur Bhandarkar and many others had created a different arena for the presentation of women going beyond the roles as wives, mothers, sisters or beloveds. There are some movies where women played the character of rebels like *Mirch Masala*, *Damini*, *Pratighat*, *Zakhm*, *Zubeida*, *Mrityudand* and several others. The modern woman of Indian cinema would no more tolerate an unfaithful husband (Arth) and would not hesitate to leave him (Pratima Mistry, 2014). There are a number of films where women tried to make an identity for themselves like *Rani Mukherjee* in *No One Killed Jessica* where she played the role of a journalist or *Priyanka Chopra* playing a career-oriented woman in *Fashion* and many others. Besides, women also started playing negative roles where they are bold and strong, *Dhoom 2*, *Aitaraaz*, etc. In earlier films, the mother did not have the liberty to live her life on her own terms. However, in *Vicky Donor* (2012), the portrayal of a mother has given altogether a different perspective. In this film, she celebrates her freedom, which is independent and lives her life on her own terms.

With this, it can be assured that today, the Hindi cinema is changing its routes from the stereotyped concept and filmmakers make women-centric movies, where they can give women the space they wanted.

Women in Cinematic Realism

The trend in movie making has changed in the mainstream Hindi cinema. It is the realistic cinema that has been appealing and presenting a real experience to the audience. Realistic cinema is very different from popular cinema. These films are made from real life situations and the existing circumstances in the society. The content and the treatment of realistic

cinema is more appealing than popular cinema. These kinds of films are becoming very admired among the audience. Most of the movies that is based on reality received critical acclaim and prestigious awards.

Cinema belonging to realistic films does not portray women as a person who would succumb to sacrifices or as submissive individuals. When it comes to realistic films, women have always played the central character of the film. These kinds of films have brought women in a different light; and also show that these films have portrayed women as individuals, who are independent and have the capability to stand up for themselves. Women gradually started to hold a niche for themselves and gained popularity. Challenging roles allowed them to break the stereotypical characters that the actresses used to play earlier.

Hence, filmmakers have started experimenting with realistic movies where females play central character in the film. One of the best filmmakers in making women centric-movies is Madhur Bhandarkar, who feels a number of issues still need to be told through such movies. He started the trend of films with women protagonists through *“Chandni Bar”*, *“Page 3”*, *“Fashion”*, *“Corporate”* and *“Heroine”*. Bhandarkar mentioned that *“I am here to make my audience happy. Whenever I do films I want to be true to reality. I am being upfront and honest in showing reality of life. Like when I was making ‘Heroine.’ I did not develop cold feet. I wanted to show reality of films”* (PTI, 2015). In his statement about *‘realistic filmmaker’*, he portrays women as bold and empowered women who can lead their lives on their own terms. His films are associated with realism where women are shown as bold and empowered women who can lead their lives on their own terms. One of

his best women-centric movies is *Fashion* (2008), where he won the Best Director Award at the Filmfare Awards.

The film, *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), is based on a true story of Jessica Lal, a Delhi-based model and a restaurant worker. The story of a real-life journalistic investigation beat was taken for the first time in Bollywood that gave the audience a truth-only narrative. Yet, the director did mention that his movie was “*part fact, part fiction*”. *No One Killed Jessica* speaks about a normal woman (acted by Vidya Balan) whose life gets trapped for seven years just to get justice for her sister *Jessica Lal’s* death. In this film, the director Raj Kumar Gupta not only mixes fact and fiction in a flawlessly beautiful blend but he also ensures to involve the grit and intensity in the film. Two women were mainly focused in the film, *Meera* played by *Rani Mukherjee* and *Sabrina Lal* played by *Vidya Balan*. The character of Sabrina has a hesitant body language, helpless. However, in her other side she is strong, bold and has the courage to fight and get justice for her sister’s murder, whereas *Meera*, a journalist is contradictory to Sabrina’s character where she is loud, uses offensive language and also smokes. The dialogues and screenplay that has been incorporated in the film has shown women as powerful and strong.

Analysis and Conclusion

Talking about Bollywood and Hollywood, both are the two of the largest film industries in the world. Since the film industries are dominated by the male society, women were considered inferior compared to their male counterparts. They were portrayed as a stereotypical image.

Mulvey focuses on women where she talks about the inequality between men and women. She also coins the term, ‘male gaze’

where women exist in order to satisfy the sexual desires and pleasures of men.

Women started to play the central characters of the film where they solely can handle the complete movie. Gradually, the presentation of women in films started changing in the mainstream cinema where they are projected as bold and independent characters.

Challenging roles were being played by the actresses. They are having a new kind of experience since they are getting to play new and exciting roles and these are the kind of roles that made them to become more dominant and powerful. In relation to women in film, noted filmmaker *Madhur Bhandarkar* said to the newspaper that, ‘*Certain issues are better conveyed from women’s perspectives*’ (Hiren Kotwane TNN, 2015).

Feminist theories have been also included in this study where Claire Johnston, said women’s cinema could function as “counter cinema” where she mentioned about the consciousness of the means of production and opposition of sexist ideologies. According to Bordwell, counter cinema is realistic cinema since it is based on reality and authorial expressivity. It shows real places such as in the movies of New Realism and New Wave. It is seen that the films like *No One Killed Jessica*, where the women characters are portrayed in a different view and they do not follow the traditional values have broken the stereotype concept. The film is based on a true event where the female leads are portrayed as strong and independent. The dialogues given to the actresses are strong and catchy. In *No One Killed Jessica*, Rani smokes and uses abusive language on screen. The characters that have been created by the director are very active and straightforward and the characters are not hesitant. Many films are being made on women, where their

portrayal s changing and we do see strong women characters in films made today. But still there is a long way to go and certain aspects need to be developed, until women-centric films become a part of the regular mainstream cinema. In women-centric films, the lead characters always used to play the positive roles.

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