

Vol 6 Issue 1 Feb 2016

ISSN No : 2230-7850

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International Multidisciplinary  
Research Journal

*Indian Streams  
Research Journal*

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**RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595**

**ISSN No.2230-7850**

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# Indian Streams Research Journal

International Recognized Multidisciplinary Research Journal

ISSN: 2230-7850

Impact Factor : 4.1625(UIF)

Volume - 6 | Issue - 1 | Feb - 2016



## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN REEL VS REAL LIFE AS INFLUENCED BY MAINSTREAM BOLLYWOOD CINEMA



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### ABSTRACT:

Women's quest for identity and equality has scarcely found place in reel representation. Very few films have some message or sense of social responsibility. The present paper aspires to probe into various under and cross currents of politics of exploitation at varied levels of family as well as social and political institutions as represented in Indian Cinema. The researcher attempt to prove how poverty, blind faith, racial and gender inequalities are responsible for the pathetic condition of women and how the present Indian Cinema gives enough voice to it.

The research paper also tries to focus on women as represented from the point of view of film

producer, director audience and the author. The paper covers and compares earlier female centric films and recent one s which stands out and breaks the major stereotypes. Indian Cinema today deconstructs the set societal norms and dares to stand by positive values of dignity, equality and welfare of the community. Through contrasting characters, in various films we see women characters are give voice to the dangers of surrendering to outdated, unexamined and slavish standards of institution of marriage.



**KEY WORDS:** *Stereotype, Quest for Equality, Indian Cinema, objectification of women, marginalization.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Cinema has always been the stepchild of academia and yet its access to the masses unlike other forms of literature has had an enormous impact on the masses that form the chunk of consumers of film.

The enormous impact of film on mass audiences has forced critics and social scientists alike to sit up and take notice. The use of film as propaganda is nothing new and this paper proposes to look at

how issues of representation and spectatorship which form the basis of feminist film theory forms an insufficient basis for the effect that film has on society. Prompted by increasing crimes against women and sexual harassment at the workplace this paper proposes to deconstruct the responses of particularly male viewership of commercial Bollywood Cinema. Feminist film criticism of select films would help us to better understand the message of films and the portrayal of women in them. The veracity of Jackie Stacey's view in 'Star Gazing: Hollywood and Female Spectator' which claims that 'identification is the means by which women conspire and become complicit in the process' is no doubt unquestionable. Women identifying with women characters onscreen generate fantasies of power, control and self-confidence within women.

When asked by the director of *Salt*, "would you like to play Bond girl in my next film?" Angelina Jolie replied, "I want to be Bond and nothing else". Why can't we find any Angelina's in Bollywood? Before any film enthusiasts defend the presence of strong female roles in Bollywood Cinema let us trace the evolution of the female character.

Cinema is meant and believed to entertain and popular media no doubt plays a key role in molding opinions, constructing images and reinforcing dominant cultural values. Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman". While sex is determined by anatomy gender is largely a cultural construct: binary opposites define male and female as being active/passive, rational/emotional, creative/conventional. Hindi cinema has hitherto restricted itself to defined sketches of womanhood; the lack of female-centric roles, stereotypical casting and the staple of gyrating, thrusting hips in clinging rain soaked saris is evident. Rarely do we find a portrayal of real women in substantial female roles. Through the feminist lens, all we have is evidence of objectification, exclusion and silence of women in cinematic narratives.

Analyzing the role of the female leading ladies we first find larger than life roles which revolve around the values of love, care, discipline and obedience. Women are depicted as passive submissive wives, the perfect daughter-in-law, the ideal mother, whose lives are marked by sacrifice of self, making them martyrs for their own families. Patriarchal values are institutionalized in films like *Dahej*, *Biwi ho to Aisi*, *Pati Parmeshwar* and Jaya Bachan's role in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam*. Women are either domestic, honourable, noble, ideal women or the other extreme the – wayward, reckless, irresponsible. The role of woman as *tawaif* is an example of this. Female characters are either black or white. The lack of real women; women who walk and live in the grey area who can be either good or bad when the situation presents itself, is conspicuously absent.

It will be unfair not to acknowledge the work of some directors who do try to walk the middle path although they too still remain chained to culture constructs whereby in a film like *Biwi No.1* Salman Khan can go back to wife Karishma Kapoor and expect to lead a normal married life after having an adulterous relationship but Vidya Balan in her character in *The Dirty Picture* has to die in the end because of her lascivious lifestyle. This demand placed on female characters is not new, From Shakespeare's Kate who is tamed at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* who goes back to being Bassanio's dutiful wife after having played the brilliant lawyer and saving Antonio's life to Juliet who is the stronger of the two lovers in *Romeo and Juliet* but who had to die in the end, there is no denying that Shakespeare gave us some powerful female characters but in keeping with the demands of a patriarchal society even his female characters slip back into the expected female roles at the end of the plays.

In keeping with this trend from as far back as Shakespeare we see all major themes being explored from the perspective of male-audiences and the woman being portrayed as the other; as secondary to the hero. Take for example the successful and talented Jaya Bacchan in *Abhimaan* who

gives up her career in order to satisfy her husband's ego bringing the story to a conventional close adhering to the traditional values of marriage and motherhood.

Notice also the abstract identities of women devoid of any independent existence. Male-centric narratives portray the woman as merely a romantic partner for example Priyanka Chopra's role in *Agnee Path* as opposed to Hrithik Roshan's role where he is busy making funeral arrangements for his father. Or in a film like *Hum Sath Sath Hain* where the doctor played by Sonali Bendre is never shown in a professional setting except for a single scene, the director choosing instead to portray this professional woman and a doctor at that as a more coy, traditional woman, the epitome of Indianness.

Kajol in *Kuch Kuch Hotha hai* loses the hero's attention and love as long as she is the sporty, tomboy type. The narrative draws to a close with a camera tilt upwards revealing the anklet decorated feet, then the sari-clad Kajol, upward to the plate containing the elements for aarti. When we finally see her face the sporty tomboy has transformed into the traditional Indian naari and truly deserving of the hero's hand in marriage.(sic). Roles like this again see women defined apropos to their families and especially men. Therefore female audiences were conditioned into believing that men could get away with anything and still continue to be the centre of the woman's universe, whereas women, no matter how tomboyish they were and how progressive they through themselves in pursuing a career, at the end, if they were to expect a happy life and to be well settled, they would have to reconstruct their image as per the demands of patriarchal society.

Many women have discovered that it is more fruitful to pamper the male ego, play to the gallery and act as the damsel in distress and hindi cinema is replete with these damsels in distress who need to be rescued by the hero their saviours. Ra-One completely qualifies in this category. What we find missing is the portrayal of women of substance. Even when women are shown as strong characters, the spotlight continues to focus on their shortcomings. For instance in the film *Corporate* an intelligent and successful woman becomes a victim during a corporate tussle due to her supposed inability to make rational decisions at the time of crisis.

In *Fashion* Priyanka Chopra is portrayed more as the victim than as someone who has fought to carve a niche for herself in the profession. In addition Mugdha Godse's marriage of convenience to gay-designer and Kangna Ranaut's subjugation to her boyfriend, all paint women in a lower light both intellectually as well as physically.

The female *Munnis*, *Sheilas* and *Chikni Chamelis* present an eroticisation of women on screen supporting what Laura Mulvey calls voyeurism and the male gaze. Educated audiences have been delighted with some contemporary female roles seeing them as a reaction against stereotypes. Directors have dared to explore subjects from the woman's point of view, films like *No One Killed Jessica*, *Paa*, *Kahani*, *Chameli*, *Cheeni Kum* present a refreshingly new image of women. But it is this which seems to be overturning and questioning traditional roles of women with directors attempting to explore otherwise taboo subjects of sexual infidelity, surrogacy, divorce, live-in relationships in movies like *Jism*, *Astitva*, *Salaam Namaste*. It is this trend that is destabilising the status quo, presenting a threat to the conventional fabric of society.

Movies like *Chak de India* with innovative realistic and substantial roles show the real conflicts faced by ordinary women in a male dominated world when they choose to excel in a field otherwise considered to be male oriented. The fact that these girls are merely normal human beings with normal desires escapes mainstream audiences, so used to being fed on a diet of 'Sita'-like women. Actresses like Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Nandita Das, Vidya Balan and Rani Mukerjee have shifted the camera's focus from the women's body to her identity as an individual and an actor like Kalki Koechlin in *Dev D* has forced the camera's focus back to her body but Madonna-like on her own terms. One cannot but

recall the roll of Shabana Azmi in the films Arth and Godmother as well as Deepa Mehta's Earth and Fire which also offer non-traditional female roles with unconventional endings. This trend however further enhances the disequilibrium in male-female roles both on and off screen.

Although roles have seen changes and the focus of the camera has shifted, mainstream audiences fail to recognise the woman's return to traditional/ conventional roles at the end of every narrative. In spite of the portrayal of strong female characters in powerful roles these films will still be considered a man's film like Black will always be Amitabh's film, Chak de India will continue to be known as a Shah Rukh Khan's film and so on. Bollywood women may change but no matter how far along the quest we have come for change through entertainment the female characters will always remain Charlie's Angel's a fact overlooked by mainstream audiences.

Feminists who won space for women little envisaged that today's women will be dissatisfied with having claimed their own space and are now seeking to appropriate male spaces as well. Women as nurturer have also found herself being equally good as provider too. She works at home tending to her family's needs and is equally efficient professionally; comfortable straddling the domestic and professional worlds.

This poses a threat to man who blames mainstream cinema for this changing trend in women's roles in turn changing the way women mould themselves in real life. Forgotten is the film's return to the traditional and the success only of the conventional Bharatiya Naari, remembered is the cursing, spitting, masculine role of women in a film like No One Killed Jessica or Bandit Queen ; an image that man finds confusing. As Foucault says "What man cannot understand he either "fetishizes" or destroys" in this case the fetishising fails because of its familiarity in mainstream cinema- the woman's body has been objectified and eroticised for so long that the male gaze fails to hold any longer, leaving the only option being destruction of the other.

A look at incidents of violence both within the home with domestic abuse and dowry deaths and outside the home with increasing incidents of acid attacks, rape and murder will show that man feels increasingly threatened by strong women portrayed in mainstream cinema and wish to prevent their own sister, wife, female colleague from even considering a transformation. To keep them from changing, it is essential for man to instill a sense of fear in the minds and hearts of women. The fear of having to deal with a woman as an equal is so intense that it has found expression in rage against unknown women, leading to the increase in crimes against women. These extreme steps are punishable by law; a deterrent to the law-abiding Indian male whose fear is projected in more subtle ways through harassment of women at the workplace not just by sexually explicit remarks but misdirecting women when it comes to performing tasks, manipulating promotions and offering flimsy excuses for paying unequal salaries.

I submit that mainstream Bollywood Cinema which has hitherto perpetuated stereotypes through the myth of the woman as dutiful wife and sacrificing mother, needs to take up issues of sexual harassment, domestic violence and crimes against women and portray them in more realistic roles suggesting conclusions that are non-traditional but appropriate providing healing and a win-win situation for both men and women.

Bollywood directors have a responsibility towards changing attitudes of society but until they realise this, the catch 22 situation with directors claiming they represent life as it is and social activists claiming that audiences are influenced by what is shown in films will continue. Men and women in society will suffer because of lack of knowledge as well as the lack of our own sense of self in the absence of which mainstream cinema will continue to influence thinking and behavior.

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