

Shifting Paradigms: Women's Roles in the films *Pakeezah* and *Mirch Masala*

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Abstract

This study examines the progression of women's roles in Bollywood cinema by analysing the films *Pakeezah* (1972) and *Mirch Masala* (1987). *Pakeezah* presents women as tragic heroines who are constrained by society norms, whereas *Mirch Masala* shows them as robust individuals who courageously confront and resist injustice. Bollywood films depict the transformation from being passive objects of desire to becoming forceful agents of change. This study explores the correlation between cinematic storylines and society attitudes, specifically focusing on the transformation of women's roles from traditional limitations to positions of power. It emphasises the themes of resilience and personal agency in overcoming challenges.

Introduction

The status of women in India has undergone great changes over the past few millennia. During the Vedic period in ancient India (2500 BC-1500 BC), women experienced egalitarianism in various domains, including education, agriculture, business, military, administration, and land ownership. They possessed autonomy within the institution of marriage and had the ability to exercise their own discretion in selecting their life partners. Nevertheless, the medieval era (1500 BC-1800 AD) witnessed a fall that was inspired by the dictums of Manusmriti, which imposed limitations on women's liberties and relegated them to lower positions (Mohapatra 56). Practices such as sati, child marriages, and prohibitions on

widow remarriage became widespread. The Mughal invaders implemented additional constraints by enforcing traditions such as the Purdah system, which restricted women's social connections.

During the British Raj, there were reform movements spearheaded by individuals such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who actively opposed societal injustices. In the early twentieth century, many women actively took part in India's fight for independence. In the decades that followed after independence, feminist Indians had many successes through legal reforms that granted women the opportunity to inherit property, access education, and pursue careers in various fields such as politics, sports, and journalism. Notwithstanding these progressions, patriarchal traditions endure, influencing societal perspectives of women. Spivak contends that "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third world woman caught between tradition and modernization" (102). It has been found that women's identity is seen through the lenses of the male psyche. Judith Butler argues that a body is divided into male or female based upon a set of actions mobilized by the law to produce effects that are necessary to patriarchal and heterosexual hegemony (12). Women's articulation of their agency and subjectivity is based on this gender difference.

Portrayal of Women in Bollywood films

In media too the dominant ideology is the patriarchal ideology. Stuart Hall argues that a film is understood or decoded by the audience based on their social-cultural milieu. In Bollywood films too it has been found that women have a subaltern existence. Conventionally, men have made films for the male gaze or pleasure (Hall, 1973). Laura Mulvey (1989) while examining the relationship between cinema and cinematic spectatorship contends that pleasure can be split into the active/male and passive/female binary (p.19). The presence of women's repression is ubiquitous in cinema, functioning to uphold patriarchal norms and prevent women from straying beyond the boundaries set by society. The male audience may find satisfaction in the portrayal of heroes or villains exerting power over women through torture and domination, while female viewers may derive pleasure from narratives where they or characters experience pain and suffering, fulfilling masochistic desires linked to sexual fantasies. In addition, men get voyeuristic pleasure and women get exhibitionistic pleasure by

seeing the erotic images of Bollywood heroines. It has been seen that whatever role a woman plays in Bollywood films, be it of a heroine, sister, mother, widow, daughter, daughter-in-law, vamp, her existence is always almost secondary to her male counterparts. The females in most films serve ornamental roles, intended to provide voyeuristic pleasure to the male gaze. They are primarily the coveted treasure pursued by both the heroes and the antagonists. In many Bollywood films, the female protagonists are kidnapped, and the male protagonists undertake the task of saving them. In a typical Bollywood film, the female characters are therefore used as playthings by the two male figures (hero and villain) who command the majority of the screen time.

In numerous films from the 1950s to the early 1970s, the heroine, or female characters like the hero's mother or sister, typically epitomize the ideal Indian/Hindu woman, often portrayed as compliant with the hero's wishes, thereby embodying prevailing patriarchal norms. In contrast, the vamp typically embodies Anglo-Indian or westernized traits, using erotic dances and voyeuristic exhibition of her body to allure the hero. By the 1980s, female roles in some films began to show women taking charge of their own lives, including making autonomous decisions about marriage and career. The 1990s saw the rise of family dramas. Women characters were portrayed as adopting western lifestyle and expressing a broad outlook. Though the present day directors are coming up with films where the principal protagonist is a woman, the number of such films is less. While there are films coming up with women characters fighting for justice and equality, or women characters leading a westernized life, they simultaneously shrink back from letting women swerve from traditional role prescriptions. The reason for this continuous return to tradition can be to satisfy the male audience. Traditional role of a woman is to be chaste, sacrificial, submissive, obedient, dutiful, and respect the male members of the society. Despite evolving narratives, a significant portion of the Bollywood audience continues to favour women depicted in traditional familial roles. As a result, in many films, the hero's quest often revolves around finding a wife who embodies beauty, domesticity, respect for elders, and a commitment to duty.

Women as muted subjects and preservers of tradition in Bollywood films

Kramerae's Muted Group Theory (1981) posits that due to men's dominant status in society, their perspectives and opinions prevail, which leads to the silencing of women's voices and

participation. The theory argues that muting reinforces the domination of men and the inferior status of women. Media outlets such as cinema are instrumental in amplifying the world view of male superiority and female inferiority and suppression. In most of the Indian movies, women are showed to be mute by making them seem invisible or absent and/or by imbuing her characteristics that show her to be weak, indecisive, sexually objectified etc. The case study included in this section is the film named *Pakeezah* (1972). The female characters in this film are portrayed as silent figures, lacking the freedom to express themselves and live according to their own desires, constrained by the complex interplay of Indian societal tensions between law, justice, cultural norms, and love.

***Pakeezah* (1972)**

The movie is about a courtesan named Sahibjaan (Meena Kumari) who is born to Nargis (Meena Kumari), also a courtesan. Sahibjaan's father is Shahabuddin (Ashok Kumar), an aristocrat who falls in love with Nargis and wants to marry her. But when the patriarch of Shahabuddin's family refuses to accept Nargis as his daughter-in-law, Nargis flees to a graveyard and dies after giving birth to Sahibjaan. On her deathbed, Nargis writes a letter to Shahabuddin to come and take his new-born daughter. However, her sister Nawabjaan (Veena) arrives first and takes the new born baby to her brothel. Sahibjaan grows up and becomes a popular courtesan because of her beauty and enthralling songs and dances. On a train journey, a young affluent man named Salim enters Sahibjaan's compartment and is captivated by her beauty as she sleeps. He leaves behind a note at her feet: *Aap ke paon dekhe, bahut haseen hai. Inhe zameen par mat utariyega.....maile ho jayenge.* (I saw your feet, they are beautiful. Don't place them on the ground, as they will get dirty.) When Sahibjaan reads the note, she weaves a romantic fantasy that this man, her lover, would one day come and rescue her from the life in a brothel. When circumstances cause them to meet again and again, Salim confesses his love for Sahibjaan and expresses his desire to marry her. Sahibjaan then reveals that she is a prostitute but Salim is still bent on marrying her. He renames her Pakeezah (pure of heart) and takes her to a priest to be legally married. However, Sahibjaan does not consider herself worthy of marrying Salim and leaves him at the altar and returns to the brothel. Eventually Salim decides to marry someone else and indignantly invites Sahibjaan to perform a dance at his wedding to another woman. Sahibjaan agrees and on the wedding day tumultuously dances on broken glass, symbolically seeking to destroy the feet that Salim loved so dearly.

During this event, Nawabjaan recognizes Shahabuddin, the uncle of Salim and calls him to witness the irony of the situation. She viciously reveals that Sahibjaan is Shahabuddin's daughter and demands that he accepts this courtesan as his daughter. Shahabuddin who had been searching for his daughter from a long time, willingly accepts his daughter and ensures her marriage to Salim. The film ends with mixed emotions of happiness and sadness as Sahibjaan's wish to escape brothel life and be with the man whom she loved was fulfilled but at the same time her father died giving her no opportunity to enjoy paternal love and affection from him. Thus we can see that the women characters in the film, leaving aside Nawabjaan are mute and weak characters who are submissive and accept their fate without question or complaint. Nargis, when spurned by Shahabuddin's family chooses the graveyard as her final destination. She accepts defeat without a fight. So also Sahibjaan accepts her fate of a life in brothel. When destiny gives her a chance to better her life through the marriage proposal of Salim, she is so disparaged by the reality of her true identity that she can't gather courage to break away from her circumstances.

In Indian culture and society, the courtesan is associated with a persona that provokes sexual feelings and dreams. As a result, it is not expected of her to assume the chaste roles of a wife or mother. She can only be acceptable in the role of an undisclosed sexual partner. Sahibjaan knew that it was close to impossible for her to break the norms of the Indian society and so resigns to her fate. She lamented that they were akin to living corpses, where their souls had perished while their bodies continued to exist. While her mother chose to live in a graveyard, she chose to live in an extravagant brothel which was akin to a graveyard for her as everyday she sold herself to her clients for money. Nawabjaan proves to be a true antagonist to the character of Sahibjaan. Though she is the aunt of Sahibjaan and has brought her up with great care, she still chooses the life of a courtesan for her niece. Sahibjaan is very popular among her rich clients and as such the source of great income for Nawabjaan. She tries everything to keep the secret of Sahibjaan's patriarch a secret. She is powerful and influential and at the same time nurtures hatred against the rich people of the society who visit brothels and play with the courtesans for their entertainment and sexual gratification and cast them aside as women of a lower status after they are no more needed. It is for this reason that she reveals the true identity of Sahibjaan to Shahabuddin on the wedding day of his nephew, Salim. She wants to humiliate Shahabuddin for belonging to a higher class and having born a child with a prostitute. In contrast to societal expectations and cultural norms, the male leads in the film

are depicted as honorable men who prioritize their love for women over familial pressures and societal conventions. It is seen that the female lead in the film (Sahibjaan) is able to lead a new life not because of her own resistance against the societal injustices but because the male leads (Shahabuddin and Salim) help her to come out of her deplorable condition. This implies that ultimately, women may improve their social standing only with the support of men, which further exemplifies the prevalence of patriarchal ideology.

Voices Unleashed: Women as Leaders in the Fight Against Oppression

In the Bollywood films of the 1970s and early 1980s, we find that women were dependent on the patriarchal society and they willingly and mutely complied with all forms of injustices. But over the years the societies have evolved and with them the expectations of women characters. This change in Bollywood mirrors a cultural movement towards recognising women as autonomous persons with agency and goals outside traditional norms. In the present day, there are movies coming up that show women who fight for their rights and defy society as dynamic characters who build their own fates. This transition enhances storytelling and meets the growing desire for diverse and empowering depictions of women in movies, appealing to audiences seeking modern principles of equality and self-determination. In the case study given below the female characters are vocal in terms of their needs and desires and the choices that they make as to the direction that they envisage their lives moving.

Mirch Masala (1987)

In this film, set in 1940s rural Gujarat, the main protagonist, Sonbai is portrayed as fending more for herself and making choices. It is the story of Sonbai's (Smita Patil's) struggle for living a life of dignity against a life of humiliation and sexual domination by a tyrannical Subedar (Tax Collector) whose advances she has spurned. The plot of the story runs like this. Sonbai is a married woman whose husband leaves for city in order to work. The Subedar (Nasiruddin Shah) is a notorious tax collector who extracts heavy taxes from the poor villagers and also occasionally raids the food, livestock and other supplies from the villagers. The villagers do not dare to displease the Subedar and try to keep him happy by setting up parties for him and his men and providing women to satiate his (Subedar's) sexual desires. One day the Subedar sees the beautiful Sonbai and asks her to yield to his desires. This outrages the self-respecting woman and she slaps the Subedar straight across his face and flees. The infuriated Subedar then orders his men to catch Sonbai and bring her to him.

Meanwhile Sonbai takes refuge in a Masala (Spices) factory where an old wizened guard, Abu Mian (Om Puri) closes the door of the factory in the nick of the time. Then the Subedar's men try to coax the guard to open the door but their efforts go in vain. After that the Subedar instructs the Mukhi (village head) to bring Sonbai to him or else the villagers will face terrible consequences. The Panchayat is called and it is decided that for the sake of wellbeing of every villager, Sonbai would be handed over to the Subedar. A school master (Benjamin Gilani), who is a follower of Gandhian views, opposes this decision saying that once the villagers give in for one woman than the Subedar would demand more, even perhaps the Mukhi's wife. At this statement, the school master is thrashed. Then the Mukhi tells that they will hand over Sonbai on the condition that the Subedar won't demand any village woman in future. The Subedar laughs off this condition.

Initially, the women who grind spices in the factory are supportive of Sonbai. However, later on, driven by fear that the Subedar might become enraged and harass women from every village, they advise Sonbai to submit to the Subedar's demands. The heartbroken Sonbai nearly relents but is stopped by Abu Mian. After that Sonbai decides not to give up the fight. Then the Subedar orders his men to break open the door. When the door is opened, Abu Mian shoots one of the Subedar's men. Immediately he also gets shot and dies. On seeing this, the women of the factory unite, summon great courage and put up a surprising defence. They attack the Subedar with fistfuls of chilli powder grinded in the spice factory. The Subedar is so much in pain due to the chilli powder in his eyes and nostrils that he in the end begs for mercy from the same woman whom he wanted to molest for the gratification of his sexual desires. Thus, it is clear that the majority of male characters in the film display attitudes of patriarchal conventions, with Abu Mian and the School master being notable exceptions. The village patriarchs advocate against educating women, preferring they stay indoors to fulfill their traditional roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, and to accede to men's wishes when needed. Abu Mian rightly states that the Mukhi and the other villagers may lord over their wives in their homes but are not man enough to face the Subedar. The film subverts the traditional gender construct of the society wherein the male patriarch is the provider and protector of the family. Since Abu Mian stood up for the wrongs done against the women, he was the only man in the entire village. The women folk at first support Sonbai, but later on criticize her for bringing trouble for everybody by not sexually satisfying the Subedar. But in the end the sense of camaraderie crops up among the women and unites them against the

Subedar. They attack him in self-defence and bring his downfall. The film is about women empowerment and the metaphor of chillies and spices is used to symbolize women/female power. The chillies symbolise strength and rebellion against injustice. The fiery spice represents the women's bravery in resisting the Subedar. Chillies bring fire and flavour to foods, and the women's combined resistance shows their tenacity in the face of adversity.

Conclusion:

Upon analysing the films *Pakeezah* and *Mirch Masala*, a significant transformation in the depiction of women's roles in Bollywood films becomes apparent. *Pakeezah* exemplifies the paradigm of the tragic heroine constrained by societal conventions. However, Meena Kumari's depiction of Sahibjaan provides a nuanced examination of femininity and perseverance within a conventional structure. Contrarily, *Mirch Masala* courageously violates these established standards by showcasing Smita Patil's depiction of Sonbai, a woman who resists subjugation and confronts unfairness. The films exemplify the changing paradigms in the portrayal of women, transitioning from being passive subjects of desire in *Pakeezah* to becoming aggressive catalysts of transformation in *Mirch Masala*. This progression reflects the larger societal shifts, in which women move away from traditional roles and actively express their autonomy while questioning patriarchal conventions. Bollywood films serve as both a mirror and a catalyst for shaping societal views on women's roles. These cinematic themes depict a transformation from sorrow to success, eventually highlighting the strength and empowerment that arise from overcoming challenges.

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