

Shifting Paradigms of Women in India through Cinematic Representation

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Abstract

Visual Media serves as a dynamic mirror reflecting the different dimensions of a nation's social, political, and economic stature. Indian cinema thus becomes a powerful tool for social change and progress of this nation towards the much-sidelined topic of gender awareness and its empowerment. After the arrival of New Wave Feminism, Indian cinema has undergone a huge transformation and the Bollywood movies are a prime witness of it. Ranging from the movies such as Mother India which showcases the strength of women to Ki and Ka, which reverses the gender roles eradicating the stigma that the same follows, there's been plethora of victories sustained in store to be celebrated. This is also no lie that the ambitious and independent women have long been portrayed in a negative light often getting objectified by their co-employee or boss due to the prevailing "male gaze" of patriarchy. From movies like Aitraaz depicting the workplace harassment pervasive in our country to the movies like Pink, Thappad and Helicopter Eela where the problems encompassing the normalisation of male entitlement, necessity of a woman's consent over sex and a woman being complete without a man are highlighted. Although the Bollywood cinema has made substantial endeavours to reflect and improve the status of women of our nation, both this country as well as the cinema have remained silent over the essential topics such as Gender pay gap or the subject of marginalization of old, uneducated, poor women of our society, who are completely dependent upon their fate and carry along the domestic baggage throughout their life. Therefore, the present paper attempts to caricature the rising graph of gender empowerment in India along with the limitations that are yet to be resolved through the application of Feminist Film Theory, laying the arguments addressed by its representative theorists.

Keywords: Feminism, Indian Cinema, Representation, Patriarchy

Introduction: Gender Empowerment, a disregarded and much ignored topic of the past has increasingly gained attention and importance in contemporary society. Gender studies has indeed become the frontline matter for both the developed and the developing countries serving as a vital tool for challenging the societal norms and structures that perpetuate discrimination and inequality based on gender. Its definition has never been rigid; rather over the years, it has evolved and transformed its meaning depending upon the nature of context, period and culture adjoining it. In present times, it can generally be defined as an egalitarian stage provided to all people where they are able to exercise their freedom of choice, have access to education and justice, financial independence, equal political ingress and an awareness towards the misinterpretation that still prevails within the society regarding the comprehension of the literal meaning of the word “gender”. Gender, as Judith Butler claims, is completely a “social construction”. Butler states, “There is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.” (Butler 10) Thus, it becomes all-important to look at the situation of India in regard with the matters of equality and empowerment of gender where the subject itself was once considered no less than a taboo to be entertained. The present outlook of India is becoming modernized in every sense. Therefore, to view the country’s status over the empowerment and equality of gender, a fine base is required for the examination. As Naila Kabeer says, “The concept of empowerment can be explored through three closely interrelated dimensions: agency, resources, and achievements. Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. It is hence central to the concept of empowerment. Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised; and achievements refer to the outcomes of agency.” (Kabeer 14)

Indian cinema is one of the most influential and powerful tools in addressing various social issues via the medium of a screenplay. (Gupta and Gupta) It is very intriguing to comprehend sometimes, whether it is the films that are shaping society or vice versa. (Bhugra) Through Indian cinema, taking the Bollywood movies at forefront, the element of women empowerment is pellucid enough which often comes along with a baggage of patriarchal and hegemonic buildup, if scrutinized with a feministic approach. India after independence underwent significant feminist phase where women had attained the right to vote and complete equality in the Indian constitution by raising their voices against the poor

and degrading status of women in the country. Thus, it can be observed that the movie *Mother India* (1957 released) by Mehboob Khan, stands as a cinematic masterpiece that not only captures the socio-economic realities of its time but also serves as a timeless portrayal of the indomitable spirit of the Indian woman and the nation as a whole. Although its portrayal of the lead woman character Radha is quite debatable due to her adherence to the traditional gender roles as a feminine wife and mother, it was for the first time in the Indian film history for its pioneering depiction of a woman-centric narrative, which reflected her overcoming the appalling challenges of life independently, without a man. But again, it is inevitable to overlook the restricted agency provided to even the revolutionary female characters back then. This proves that women were provided a position of power only within the confines and under the obligation of the traditional woman imagery defined by the patriarchal mindset. Objectification, preconceived prejudices towards women and an ever-existing predominance of “male gaze” can be witnessed through the portrayal of women characters in the movies both globally as well as in India. As demonstrated in “Feminist film theory”, Budd Boetticher summarizes the view: "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself, the woman has not the slightest importance." It was especially after the arrival of the western second-wave feminism that the strength of often silenced women began to be displayed over screens, which not only influenced the western world but also the Indian society. “Whereas first-wave feminism focused mainly on suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality (e.g., voting rights and property rights), second-wave feminism broadened the debate to include a wider range of issues: sexuality, family, domesticity, the workplace, reproductive rights, de facto inequalities, and official legal inequalities.” (Burkett) In India, it was the third feministic wave which was also under the enormous impact of global feministic wave, where the much larger issues concerning women were raised including their land rights as well as their rise in salary demands at workplaces. With the expansion in women’s education and the elevation of their transitioning lifestyle at a fast pace, it became normalized at workplaces to find women occupying space as much as men did. The movie *Ki and Ka* directed by R. Balki can be justifiably viewed where not only does a portrayal of an independent working woman is caricatured but there also persists the reversal of gender roles and responsibilities usually tied with the specific gender. But even with its magnanimous shift in displaying women’s

liberation and authority, the movie is still looked down by feminist film critics such as Zainab Imam who believes that Kabir's mother, a housewife in the movie, still depicted the conventional characterization of a mother as she sacrificed her pleasures and dreams for his husband, which Kabir also tried to carry forward by calling home building as no less than an art. It was then that the Indian cinema also began dealing with the injustices and exploitation faced by women at their workplaces. Independent and ambitious women were often depicted in a negative light, often through the lens of sexual objectification or by portraying them as morally loose or fallen characters. This portrayal reflects deep-seated societal attitudes towards women who challenge traditional gender roles and assert their autonomy. As stated in "Feminist film theory", Laura Mulvey also expands on this conception to argue that in cinema, women are typically depicted in a passive role that provides visual pleasure through scopophilia, and identification with the on-screen male actor. She asserts: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness," and as a result contends that in film a woman is the "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." This psyche of what feminist critics call a "male gaze" has overtaken essentially over the after 2000s Bollywood movies. Women who do not conform to the traditional values associated with them and are modernized or westernized are seen as an easy bait. So, it can be derived that only the traditional type of woman who has been hegemonized and accepted by the patriarchal society holds dignity and power in the society.

In the blockbuster movie *Aitraaz* (2004 released) directed by Abbas–Mustan, an unusual kind of workplace exploitation is depicted where the male character Raj is falsely been accused of sexual harassment by his boss' wife, who is a strong, powerful and independent female character Sonia. Sonia in the movie is shown as a shrewd manipulator and schemer who is basically reflected as a gold digger, also carrying an obnoxious image but is just open about her sexual desires. This movie, according to feminist film critics, fixates the negative imagery of an independent working woman in India, who is then in reality is exploited at workplaces by being asked for doing sexual Favors to their co-employees or boss. This movie is a prime example of how Indian films tend to portray the modern woman in a bad light, again showcasing the patriarchal hegemony. Sahima Gupta stated in "*Aitraaz*", that "*Aitraaz* attempted to be a ground breaking film in its portrayal of women, it still ended up in binaries of good vs bad." (Gupta) Priya, an educated young woman in the movie, has become a pawn

of power held by the patriarch, as she left her work and became “the angel in the house” after marriage with Raj without any questioning, which also represents that how patriarchal hegemony torments the work life balance of woman. The patriarchal construct is real, and it is embedded in cultures. It imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women. In some societies, culture and religion have imposed certain responsibilities on women regardless of their employment status and career. (Adisa,7)

Indian cinema has although made an endeavour to showcase woman’s strength through the movies like *Thappad* (2020 released) and *Helicopter Eela* (2018 released) where the resistance of woman is shown towards the injustices experienced by them. Anubhav Sinha’s *Thappad* deals with how the society gives men the entitlement to react violently towards a woman as per their convenience and Pradeep Sarkar’s *Helicopter Eela* has tried to exhibit a woman’s completeness without having a man by her side. This legitimizes the strength of a woman and renders an honest attempt made by the Bollywood movies to picture the figure of an empowered woman. The movie *Rashmi Rocket* (2021 released) by Akarsh Khurana has endeavored to unveil the inequity prevailing in the testosterone regulations employed over women athletes, who are denied the participation in the sport if they fail in this test. So once again Indian cinema is raising the unheard voices of numerous women athletes regarding this much debatable and yet an unfair law.

Indian cinema, therefore, is viewed as an appropriate medium to provide a critique of the present-day situation of women in India. It garners a record of the evolution undertaken by the women of this country from a negligent and undervalued position to somewhat an equipped station today, which is although tormented under the hegemonic authority of patriarch, making a considerable progress. There are yet many marginalized sections of poor, old women, who are kept from the big screens of cinema and are completely dependent upon the rule of destiny and other dominating external forces. However, women in India are somehow trying to overcome the fetters of society by empowering themselves and are emerging, if not victorious, then definitely deeply transformed and aware.

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