

The New Woman: Changing patterns in the depiction of woman in current Bollywood films

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Abstract

This is a non-research based literary paper in which I have tried to figure out the traditional roles played by women in classic Hindi cinema under the sheer dominion of social, political and cultural ideologies prevalent in India. Parallel to this, I have also given a try at explaining this conventional pattern of women portrayal in terms of the psychological content of a phallogentric societal order. I have thereafter located the points of transition in this depiction pattern of women in current Bollywood films that aim at creating the image of a 'new empowered woman' fighting for her basic rights who is personally identifiable and yet globally presentable. Finally I have traced the probable causes that seem to have facilitated this momentous transition in the history of Mumbai cinema.

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A monolith by structure, film industry has always remained a faithful exhibitioner of the dominant social-political-economic-cultural ideologies of a nation. Irrespective of the society that constructs it, cinema is one of the most powerful reflectors of the prevailing norms as well as aesthetics of a particular society, which also covertly acts as a tool to perpetuate these norms and aesthetics. The formal organization of a film is structured by the collective unconscious of the patriarchal society, which in turn promotes certain states of mind among its viewers. Films reflect, reveal, and even play on the socially established interpretation of the sexual difference between man and woman, and this interpretation controls the images and spectacles shown on screen. More often than not there have been limited stereotypical roles assigned to female characters of which the most prominent and repetitive happens to be that of the lady love or the object of desire of the man (hero). The Indian Hindi cinema, better known as 'Bollywood', has been no exception from the perspective of positioning woman as a subordinate, supportive character vis-à-vis the epicentral male character. Over the last seven decades of Hindi cinema, directors have been many and sundry, and their directorial ventures have been even more. But quite disappointingly, the placement of woman character has remained unaltered. Lacking in any form of personal identity, a woman has always been projected in relation to the male characters in films like, mother to the hero, lady love of the hero, victim of the villain (who happens to be a male figure), etc. Precisely, the presence of a woman in cinema has got nothing to do with the plot and its movement. She is just an adornment, a film-décor.

According to Laura Mulvey in her celebrated essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', on heterosexual orientation assumption the 'male visual pleasure' of the audience is the controlling pleasure in cinema. It acts at two separate levels, first, the 'voyeuristic attraction' that results from watching the woman (heroine) which tends to weaken the male ego; second, the 'narcissistic identification' that occurs on seeing the man (hero) which in turn strengthens the male ego. The voyeuristic attraction is ambivalent in nature. Whereas on the one hand the woman is a 'lure' or an 'attraction' to the man, on the other hand she is also a 'threat' or 'repulsion' to him. 'Lure' she is for obvious reasons, but 'threat' because she embodies a 'lack' (absence of the phallus which marks the centre of 'power'). This castrated woman is a 'disempowered' creature projected on screen as someone who necessarily needs to be rescued by the 'empowered' phallus-bearer, the hero. Phallogentrism derives its essence from the image of this castrated woman. Cinema upholds this image of the castrated woman as an object of male gaze to gratify the fetishistic masculine sensibilities which also contributes to the empowerment of the male ego and hence the phallogentric mindset. Thus the female character is the erotic object of desire not only for the male characters in the film but also for the audience (which is invariably recognized to be masculine). The presence of woman has been indispensable to the erotic spectacle in narrative films. The man's role is to forward the story of the film, to make things happen, he is the bearer of the look, whereas woman has always remained as merely the spectacle. Man causes 'diegesis', and woman is the 'extradiegetic element'. Hence man is the maker of meaning and woman is only the bearer of it.

Literally speaking, 'empowerment' involves obtaining basic rights and opportunities for the marginalized people who have been excluded from decision-making by socially ostracizing them on the basis of disability, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. It also involves encouraging and developing the skills for self-sufficiency with a focus on eliminating the future need for charity for the individuals of the group. Feminism as a movement and ideology that sprouted in different parts of the globe has forever targeted at the empowerment of the marginalized, more importantly of woman, which involves defining, establishing, achieving equal social-political-economic-cultural-personal rights and opportunities. Feminism can be broadly divided into three waves or phases. The first wave found prominence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and emphasized on woman's suffrage and right to hold public office. It was a period of activity during the 19th century

and early twentieth century. In the UK and US, it focused on the promotion of equal contract, marriage, parenting, and property rights for women. By the end of the 19th century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage, though some feminists were active in campaigning for women's sexual, reproductive, and economic rights as well. Emmeline Pankhurst of New York, Wilhelmina Drucker of Netherlands, Louise Weiss of France were some of the eminent faces of this wave. The second wave gained momentum in the mid twentieth century and dealt with women's liberation and social-political-cultural-legal equality of women. It encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures. The feminist activist and author Carol Hanisch coined the slogan 'The Personal is Political', which became synonymous with the second wave. Feminist leaders rooted in the second wave were Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, to name a few. During this period French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir provided a Marxist solution and an existentialist view on many of the questions of feminism with the publication of *The Second Sex* in 1949. The third wave that came into existence in the late twentieth century was a continuation as well as a reaction against the failures of the second wave. It took into account the issues of sexuality, challenging female heterosexuality and celebrated sexuality as a means of female empowerment. It often focussed on 'micro-politics' and challenged the second wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for women, and tend to use a post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality. Contrary to popular belief, feminism has never been against patriarchy. Its singular goal is to strive for etching out a niche for women, and to vindicate their rights and space in a male-dominated society.

Recent emergence of films like *Dor*, *Fashion*, *English Vinglish*, *Queen*, *Margarita With a Straw*, and biopics like *Dirty Picture*, *Mary Kom*, and very recently *Neerja*, map the transgressively progressive journey of the lead female characters from home to the world, from encapsulation to emancipation, from nonentity to self-made identity. Empowerment of woman involves in the very foremost position the social and more importantly the domestic emancipation of woman, and the Nagesh Kukunoor film *Dor* (2006) that features Ayesha Takia, Gul Panag and Shreyash Talpade in the lead explores this idea with utmost fidelity. The trappings posed by culture and tradition on an individual and the ensnaring of personal freedom as objectified through the character of Meera, a coy domesticated widow played by Ayesha Takia, and her eventual breaking through every shackle and

hurdle towards the attainment of a life worth the risk is epiphanic. Zeenat, played by Gul Panag, is the woman of the world. She is out to seek justice for her imprisoned husband. She is brave, outspoken and upright. These two women brought together by fate find redemption by helping each other. *Dor* makes a strong feminist statement without being strident or shouting slogans. A woman aware of her worth, conscious of her self-esteem and capable of making decisions of her life is probably the quintessence of empowered woman, and Gauri Shinde's 2012 film *English Vinglish* starring Sridevi in the lead is a riveting tale that recounts how an underrated and under-confident middleclass housewife Shashi Godbole gains confidence and self-respect only when she steps out of the house and takes a life-changing decision. Learning English language may not sound like a life changing decision but it does transform Shashi in the way she sees herself and wants others to see her. A simple act of 'decision taking' is the first step towards her self-discovery and self-liberation. Initially she is seen as being humiliated and ridiculed by her husband and own daughter for not being. The film's story works on many layers, and what I especially admire is how Shashi becomes the spokesperson for lessons without being too overt about it, save for the closing speech in the final scene of the film that hammers in the emotion, and is sure to make your eyes well up. *English Vinglish* is not just about English classes, it's just a metaphor or platform to narrate a simple yet very effective story of self-determination, self-respect and love for family of an 'empowered' woman. The 2014 super hit *Queen* which established its lead actor Kangana Ranaut as the youth icon among young girls, is a simple coming-of-age story of a naive and introvert girl. 8th March is observed as International Women's Day and *Queen* celebrates it with panache. When Rani, played amazingly brilliant by Kangana, discovers herself, her self-esteem, and her self-dependent identity on her solo honeymoon trip to Paris and Amsterdam, she comes back to India with a winning smile on her face. The same smile is pasted on our face throughout the movie. There is hardly any feminine emotion left that has not been touched upon in this witty, gritty, funny, emotional and very subtle cinematic portrayal of an ideology that a woman is more than being a mother, a sister or a wife. From the fear of public embarrassment after her fiancé calls off their wedding owing to her below average physical appearance, to the confidence of letting go of social trappings, and most importantly, moving ahead in life without reconciling with her penitent fiancé, Rani is an empowered 'every woman'! She embodies millions of us!

Emancipation and empowerment on a completely different level has been explored in films like *Piku* (2015) and *Margarita, With a Straw* (2015). A warm, charming, bittersweet family drama, Shoojit Sircar's *Piku* is a genre in itself. The film gives the go-by to the usual trappings in the portrayal of the heroine in most Hindi films and offers a fresh and deliciously quirky take on a deeply layered father-daughter relationship that borders on the dysfunctional. What gives the film a feminist angle is that marriage and maternity are not depicted as mandatory deals for a woman. In fact it is a "low IQ decision" for a woman to get married and devote the rest of her life to her husband and his family and kids at the cost of her independence and individuality. *Piku*, a fiercely independent and self-empowered architect, portrayed by Deepika Padukone, is an unmarried woman in her thirties who has her priorities clearly set. She oscillates between professional obligations and filial liabilities which she prioritizes above her personal desires. Marriage is definitely not in her mind, love affair does not get much time from her, and sex is a matter of "need". Parallel, director Shonali Bose and lead actress Kalki Koechlin are on top of their respective games in *Margarita, With a Straw*, an offbeat film that is both sensitive and provocative. The wonderfully well-scripted film focuses on the most intimate physical and emotional needs of a woman with cerebral palsy. The protagonist Laila, played by Kalki, is unlike any heroine that Indian cinema has ever showcased. She is physically challenged, but that isn't the only aspect of her personality that the director underlines. Laila has to contend with several other 'minority' identities. She is a woman in a man's world. She is a Sikh's daughter. And her sexual orientation isn't obviously deemed 'normal' by those that do not know better. But nothing at all can stop Laila from pursuing the urges of the flesh and soul in quest of self-fulfillment. Laila – and the film – grows on us steadily as she emerges as a 'full-bodied' character making no bones about her need for sexual gratification. So nuanced is the characterization that the fact that Laila is a physically challenged woman eventually ceases to matter. The film manages to evoke a full appreciation of the adventurous spirit of a woman who breaks all preconceived notions about life on a wheelchair.

From the routinized playing of naïve and petite film-décors that have almost nothing to contribute to the diegesis of the film, woman-characters have traversed a long and rather undulating path to reach a point where they are depicted as formidable entities mastering their lives and realizing their passions, and this journey has been essentially sketched by the filmmakers. Hence, the inevitably crucial question that comes to the fore is- why this sudden upgradation in the perception of

the filmmakers? What has urged them to bring a change in the way of projecting women on silver screen? One may be tempted to such understanding that with the unprecedented development in the field of media and technology, with the unexpected contraction of the vast world into a quasi-singular world-state, with the sudden encounter with the Euro-American culture, filmmakers in India were awoken to the realization that the consumerist audience, to whom they cater their films, has itself undergone a complete metamorphosis. This metamorphosis of the Indian audience was caused by several factors like, immense development of media and technology, advancement in the field of education, survival strategy in the global market, standardization caused by more powerful agents, and so on.

Fredric Jameson in his famous essay 'Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue' considers the process of globalization from the perspective that it concerns the transformation of the economic into the cultural and vice versa; the rise of consumer culture around the world; the production and cancellation of forms of subjectivity; and the challenges it presents to national identity, local culture, and traditional forms of everyday life. Discussing the overlapping themes of transnational consequence, Jameson describes how the global character of technology, communication networks, consumer culture, intellectual discourse, the arts, and mass entertainment have all been affected by recent worldwide trends. As an immediate impact of globalization, advancement of technology, easy accessibility to internet, affordable price of television, radio, mobile phones and other electronic gazettes, Indian cinephiles have been enabled to watch how filmmakers of other continents, especially America and Europe, showcase female characters on screen. Whereas Hollywood had portrayed a character like Erin Brockovich in 2000, played by Julia Roberts, a smart, sassy, confident and independent character, in the same year Bollywood had nothing to boast of except Ameesha Patel playing an eye-candy in *Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai* and Shilpa Shetty enacting the role of a submissive housewife in *Dhadkan*. As an obvious result of this intermingling of culture, what followed next was a compulsive desire of the audience to watch a globalised yet nationally identifiable image of the Indian woman on screen; an Indian woman who would be comparable to any woman of the western culture and also presentable on the international platform. Hence Bollywood film directors were induced to affect a merger with the westernized pattern of female portraiture; the picture of a bold and fiery, self-conscious and responsible, outspoken and dauntless woman. It was not until 2006 when Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dor* came out, a film in which Indian audience witnessed for the first time a coy domesticated widow Meera,

played by Ayesha Takia, break through every emotional hurdle, social fetter, cultural trapping towards the attainment of an emancipated life.

Education and enlightenment also played important roles in shaping the mindset and desire of the audience; what the filmgoers wanted from art and literature (cinema being undoubtedly all the three). An educated woman strives to master her life, chase her passions, and actualize her dreams. She craves for independence- both financial and emotional. When such a woman, or even an educated man, goes to a theatre to watch a film they will definitely not appreciate any form of glorification of aesthetically demeaning or servile treatment of a female character on screen. As a matter of fact, Indian audience is composed of a huge number of such educated moviegoers whose taste for films and expectation from films need to be taken care of and addressed to by the directors. This is the sole reason why a heavy-budget Rajshri production *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo* (2015), though succeeds in garnering an exorbitant box-office collection of some 150 crores in its opening week, fails to impress the audience aesthetically. What Bhagyashree portrayed in *Maine Pyaar Kiya*, the top grossing Bollywood film of 1989, or what Madhuri Dixit played in the 1994 musical blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun* (both being Rajshri productions), is in no way different from what Sonam Kapoor does in *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo* in 2015. So the only plausible justification of the failure of *Prem Ratan* turns out to be the changed perception and expectation of the audience from cinema. Film-lovers no longer relish the view of a woman who is merely a pretty face with a svelte body, a nagging crybaby, dressing and dolling up, dancing and singing and moaning through the entire span of the film.

The necessity to survive in the ever-growing, ever-devouring capitalist-consumerist world-market is another probable reason behind the changed depiction pattern of woman in films. Cinema happens to be the most extensively consumed cultural commodity, reaching out to a mass of some billions of people across the whole country. Cinema and television have the power to readily transform materialistic commodities into cultural products. The dissolution of high culture and the overwhelming investment on popular cultural commodities clearly suggest that whatever may have been the case during early capitalism, today commodity form reigns supreme in every sphere of human life. Hence it becomes an imperative compulsion of the film industry to gratify the expectations of its audience in order to ensure whopping box-office collection, thereby preventing it from extinction. One must not forget that it is the capitalist-consumerist market itself that shapes the desires and expectations

and culture of its audience. Cinema is not only the base but also the superstructure; it is not merely a product and producer of dominant cultural ideologies but also a powerful medium for generating enormous profit and income. Therefore, in order to survive in the consumerist world, Bollywood filmmakers were inevitably induced to adopt a newer and more liberated form of perception with the sole intention of keeping the in-flow of both film-lovers and money alive.

But the construction of the image of an 'empowered woman' is neither simple nor easily explicable. The notorious strategy of standardization seems to operate at this level too. Globalization is not just a matter of cultural intermingling or celebration of plurality. It is in no way less than a nefarious hegemonic tool for co-opting, standardizing and Americanizing the cultures of every other non-American space. The traditional image of an ideal Indian woman is that of 'sati-savitri', a perfectly homebound, meek docile creature, lacking every capacity to protest against the wrong-doing and injustice inflicted upon her. She is someone devoid of a personal identity- she is either a caring mother to someone, or a dutiful wife, or an obedient daughter. She talks less, works more, and obeys even more than that. Her life revolves round the lives of her parents, her husband, her children, her family, to the complete ignorance of her own desire, dreams and aspirations. When such an image of a woman comes in direct confrontation with a diametrically opposite image, it goes without saying that one has to co-opt the other. And considering the fact that the west has always had a convincing influence on the east, both socially and culturally, it is quite possible that the traditional Indian image of a woman gets appropriated by the imperialistic American image.

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