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Women and Indian Films

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Abstract:

Men in most societies were seen as breadwinners while role of women was restricted to being a good homemaker and a good mother. This applies to women in a highly patriarchal society of India. As societies entered the world of modernization, the role of women changed dramatically. Media played an important role in the modernization of societies and greatly affected the image of women in today's modern world. Stating that the representation of women in the mainstream Indian cinema has been "stereotypical and coquettish" for far too long, eminent filmmakers and actors have said it is important to question, challenge and break rules against such stereotypes in films as well as in the society. Famous Bollywood filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj, however, claimed that the condition of women in Indian film is changing. But he stressed the importance for men to come forward to put an end to suppression of women in the society. A number of researches have been done on the role of women in different societies in bollywood. However little has been said about the importance of films in portraying women in shifting roles over different decades and the impact it has on societies in general. Over past decades, Indian cinema has witnessed a significant transformation in the way women are portrayed through films. Contemporary films portray women as more independent, confident, and career oriented. The present study aims at this fast changing role of women portrayed in Indian cinema and its influence on the patriarchal Indian society with a focus on some representative Bollywood films. The aim is to link the changing character played by women in films with the emerging status of women in India, as films are a reflection of changes in the social structure.

KEY WORDS: BOLLYWOOD, INDIA, FILMS, WOMEN, ROLES

Introduction:

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Indian Women have excelled in every field and have engraved their names in many parts of the universe, but there still seems to be a long route ahead before she attains equal status in the minds of Indian men.

'Most agricultural civilizations downgraded the status and potential of women, at least according to modern Western standards and to the implicit standards of hunting-and-gathering societies. Agricultural civilizations were characteristically patriarchal; that is, they were run by men and based on the assumption that men directed political, economic, and cultural life. Furthermore, as agricultural civilizations developed over time and became more prosperous and more elaborately organized, the status of women deteriorated from its initial level.'[1]

In a well-defined patriarchal society like India, even the cinematic world deems to project women as in factual life. This is a good thing as films have mass appeal and at least some if not all carry out a message to the public and try to create awareness. There is a myth that women are characterized in films to prop up the male role rather than characterize them as the one who keeps the narrative structure sinuous. Women are insinuated in films as bearing the burden of sexual objectification that male roles cannot. Hence, they become the bearer, and not the maker of meaning says Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 834). Most Indian women live a silent life with enormous amount of sacrifices and retain their frustration within themselves for the sake of societal pressure.

Women in Indian cinema are born with certain assumptions ranging from cult movies to celluloid blockbusters like Sholay to more recent Fashion that employ themselves as in severe gender issues. They are portrayed either as damsels in distress or demented feminists or simple belly-shaking glam dolls whose sole ambition is to attract the attention of the male gender. In many Indian films it is a common trend to insert 'item numbers' which bear no rational connection to the film in anyways but with an assumption that the film is easily associated. *As Bindu Nair(2009:53)says, 'Sometimes the one song ends up making the film a hit, such as 'Chamma Chamma' from the film China gate.'*

Occasionally, do we see a female being the protagonist of a film than merely being objects of sexual desire. In some cases there appears to be a clash between 'modern feminism' and 'traditional values'. Indian cinema often acts like an emotional register and is very resourceful while reading the characterization of 'Women'.

[1] *(http://history-world.org/Civilization,%20women_in_patriarchal_societies.htm)*

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Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture in this century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding art form could ever achieve. Hindi cinema has influenced the way in which people perceive various aspects of their own lives. The three movies that we discuss here have three different points of view towards women. To some extent they identify areas where ``modern feminism'' comes into contact with ``traditional values.'' The analysis which follows tries to decipher and articulate these points of view. It also attempts to determine the ways in which these films affect the discourse generated by the Women's Movement. But before the analysis we summarize the plots of these films.

The first film analyzed is the 1994 blockbuster *Mohra*. It is standard Bombay fare featuring stars like Akshay Kumar (as Amar Saxena), Raveena Tandon (as Roma Singh), Sunil Shetty (as Vishal Agnihotri) and Naseeruddin Shah (as Mr Jindal). Vishal is imprisoned in the jail where Roma's father is the superintendent. Roma goes to visit her father's jail in order to write an article about it. There some prisoners try to rape her. Vishal rescues her from them. Roma finds out that Vishal is imprisoned for murder. On probing she finds that Vishal had been married and his wife's sister had been raped and killed by some boys in her college who were under the influence of drugs. Due to a corrupt prosecutor the boys went scotfree. They then tried to rape Vishal's wife. She stabbed herself before they could get to her. In response, Vishal killed all four of them and got imprisoned for it. Roma, with the help of Mr Jindal, the blind owner of the paper she works for, arranges a second ``trial'' for Vishal in which his case is reviewed and he is released. Mr Jindal convinces Vishal that he should become a vigilante and kill the real culprits behind his wife and sister-in-law's deaths i.e. the drug dealers. Amar Saxena is a police officer who is also involved in busting the two main drug dealers of their city, the evocatively named Tyson and Gibran. Vishal starts killing off their henchmen but Amar gets on his trail. Despite that, Vishal finishes almost all of them off. Jindal now tells him to kill the Commissioner of Police who he says is corrupt. But Vishal realizes that this is a setup and confronts Jindal. It turns out that Jindal is not blind and he is actually an evil mastermind who wanted Tyson and Gibran to be destroyed so that he could become the undisputed king of crime. He kidnaps Roma, who is now engaged to Amar, and is about to escape with her when Amar and Vishal, together now, foil his plans in the expected way.

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The next film we consider is *Mother India*, made in 1957 by Mehboob. This is the story of Radha (Nargis Dutt) who marries Shamoo (Raj Kumar) and comes to his village. There she discovers that Shamoo's mother, Sundar Chachi, has pawned their family land to pay for the wedding. The village usurer, Sukhilala, takes three-fourths of their produce as interest on the loan of 500 rupees (about $15) that he gave her. Every year they give most of their produce to Sukhilala but they are unable to pay off the loan because all they give to him is counted as interest. Sukhilala is able to get this deal through because Sundar Chachi is illiterate and has put her thumb imprint on a contract she cannot read. In an effort to clear an arid piece of land which they own, Radha and Shamoo try to move some big boulders. In this process one of the boulders rolls on to Shamoo's arms and he has to have them amputated. He is unable to come to terms with his helpless condition and runs away leaving Radha alone. Soon after this Sundar Chachi dies. This is followed by a flood in which two of Radha's four sons die. Sukhilala offers her food in return for her sexual favours. She resists for a long time but is unable to bear the fact that her children are starving. So she goes to his place. Just as she is about to submit to him she gets a divine signal that her husband is still alive. She leaves Sukhilala's house and confronts her problems with new hope. Next we see her as an old woman and her two sons Birjoo (Sunil Dutt) and Ramoo (Rajendra Kumar) as grown men. Ramoo is a responsible type but Birjoo is a ne'er-do-well who resents the fact that Sukhilala continues to take three-fourths of their produce. Birjoo's inability to control his aggression makes him a nuisance to the villagers and finally, despite Radha's pleas, he is thrown out of the village and becomes a dacoit. When Sukhilala's daughter is getting married he threatens to come and abduct her. Radha assures Sukhilala that she will protect his daughter's honour and, when Birjoo comes and tries to abduct her, Radha shoots him dead.

The third film is *Mirch Masala*, made in 1989 by Ketan Mehta. It is the story of Sonbai (Smita Patil) who works in a chili factory somewhere in the western part of preindependance India.

Her husband gets a job in the railways and leaves for the city. In the meantime the Subedar (or tax collector, played by Naseeruddin Shah) arrives to collect taxes and he sees Sonbai. He is attracted to her and asks the village headman, the Mukhi, to send her to him. He sends the wrong woman. The next day she is passing by the place where the Subedar has his camp. He stops her and grabs hold of her. She frees herself and slaps him. He asks his soldiers to catch her. She runs

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into the chili factory where she works. The old muslim watchman Abu Miyan (Om Puri) takes her in and closes the gates. A parallel thread is that of the Mukhi's wife, the Mukhiain, who is not treated well by her husband. She tries to drum up support for Sonbai when she gets to know that her husband and all the men of the village have capitulated to the Subedar and have agreed to hand Sonbai over to him. But her protest is rudely crushed by the men, and the Subedar, accompanied by all the men of the village, reaches the factory. Abu Miyan refuses to open the doors and the Subedar's men break it down and kill him. In the final scene of the film the Subedar approaches Sonbai when suddenly the other women in the factory take bags of chili powder and throw them in his face.

In 1971 Mulvey said that though an alternative cinema was possible `` .. it can still only exist as a counterpoint.' However *Mirch Masala* refutes this. Providing a counterpoint is an important function of the film and, as we have seen above, it carries this function at various levels. But *Mirch Masala* sees *looking*, which is one of the major ``psychical obsession" of popular film, as something bigger than popular film. The larger scheme of the film is to attack the *look*, not only in cinema, but in the real world.

Writing in the ``Economic and Political Weekly," Supriya Akerkar argues that

`` ... women's movements can be treated as `discursive practices.' ... They do not depend for their existence on prior theories of emancipation, but rather seek a new relation with theory through localised articulation and understandings of emancipation."

While agreeing with this point of view I would like to add that the discourse which Akerkar refers to is not independent of influences lying outside the Women's movement. It has been my effort in this paper to look at the way in which three radically different films have affected the discourse. It would be reductive to try and thread these three films together and pass judgments on each of them. In a contemporary context each of them has their own importance; the reach and acceptability of *Mohra* far surpasses that of *Mirch Masala* which has to bear the cross of being an ``art film." *Mother India's* message of progressiveness and the subtle and effective way it propagates this message is a plus for it which neither of the other films can claim. *Mirch Masala's* militant feminism and empowering messages are far more acceptable in light of the contemporary feminist debate than *Mother India*. Its cinematic progressiveness (in the way it

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wields a sensitive, non-voyeuristic camera) shows up *Mohra* as a retrograde ultraconservative film which undermines a seemingly progressive female character.

Conclusion:

Each of these films, however, has the capability of affecting the discourse and, in fact, each of these films has done so. The issues which these films raise and address are wide and varied. This paper has made an attempt here to present different points of view on the same set of issues. It is believed that each of these films has something or the other to learn from the others. In the foreseeable future it is unlikely that the strands that these films represent will merge or even approach each other but a communication will eventually emerge between them which will benefit all of them.

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