

GENDER IN INDIAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Films as an art form embrace both elitist and popular concepts of art and work closely with literary aesthetics. The two art forms verbal and visual are interactive reciprocities. What does feminism imply in the context of films? Films largely act as social mirrors. It is believed that films are a true reflection of society and social values. In film women is seen not heard.

The visual medium has wider perspective with multiple agencies etc, narrator, lights, use of space, body language, facial expressions as well as silences. The functioning of reality and fantasy acquire altogether different dimensions in the films which aim at mass audiences and pure entertainment. Unlike novels cinema has wider scope to reach the audience in a much powerful manner irrespective of language, culture.

INTRODUCTION

When you look at Indian films from the gender point of view a number of questions can be cropped up. The cinema has its own limitations. In its search for a mass audience it tends to be rhetorical and melodramatic. The dialogue in a film is very powerful and important. It is made with symbols, myths, inferences which are easily recognizable.

“Men act, women appear, men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at”

(John Berger)

One cannot talk without referring to ‘Ray’ one of the greatest luminaries in the world of cinema. Aparajita and devi are his classics. The history of Indian cinema goes as far back as 1913 when Dada Sahib Phalke one of the pioneers of the silent feature film in Indian cinema broke ground with Rajah Harishchandra. There have been films dealing with social, political and psychological themes.

The stories played out on the screen are the men their conflicts, their desires, dreams, their aspirations, tragedies, and heroism. The women exist only in relation to the men, as their

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mothers, their wives, and especially their lovers. It is hard to find even one story revolving around a single unattached woman. Traditionally, women have been reduced to being a mere spectacle in the movies, pretty faces commodities for their beauty, with hardly any dividing line between beauty contests and acting in films (Aishwarya Rai, Sushmitha Sen, Katrina Kaif, Kareena Kapoor, Deepika Padokone).

Sometimes the one item song ends up making a film a hit, such as 'sheela sheela ki jawani'.

The gaze is invited to certain parts of the body selectively considered sexual the eyes, the lips, the breasts, the navel, the buttocks, and the legs. Make up techniques include brightly colored, glossy lips, cleavage roughed darker than the rest of the body, tattoos on the navel etc. the costumes are often dazzling with sequins or a metallic finish, brightly colored. The natural contours of the bodies of the actresses are frequently distorted with pushups bras, padding's and to emphasize these unnaturally distended body proportions, the women are frequently shot either from a low angle or from a high angle to show the cleavage. The actions of the women in dance often mimic sexual movements with numerous shots of just body parts, like that of heaving breasts of pelvic thrusts. All these add up in sexualizing the body of the women for benefit of the male viewer.

Women in Indian cinema ranging from cult movies and celluloid blockbusters like sholay of the seventies to the which engages itself with serious gender issues continue to be portrayed and presented as either damsels in distress to be rescued by knights in shining armor or demented feminists, or just plain simple belly shaking glamorous dolls, whose sole ambition in life is to attract the attention of accomplished males.

The male characters of Indian cinema and the villains move around the space of the movie like players in a deadly choreographed game of chess with the women characters as the sacrificial pawns. The vitalizing power of the women characters is always absolutely ignored. The two areas on which I wish to focus attention are firstly the mothers role inheriting all the power and status of the mother goddess tradition of Indian culture and secondly women characters trapped in secondary roles as somebody's wives, somebody's daughters but never their own selves i.e. never as women individuals in their own right.

The mother's role, in Indian culture, enjoys a double inheritance as it encompasses the mother goddess tradition. She is the combined energy of the gods but she wields weapons and battles alone with hardly any male support. She is the benevolent Shakti the actualize of gods latent power and the embodiment of his grace. She enjoys an independent status.

In the movie 'kya kehna' the decisions of the heroine come very close to this ideal but then the glass ceiling appears again and the recurring concern for mass approval and erudite assent resurfaces repeatedly overshadowing the essence and spirit of the character. Male bonding is

always depicted in positive light songs endorse that phenomena. When it comes to female bonding it is either depicted as women hurling hostilities on their own sex or the other extreme of physical closeness as in Deepa Mehta's 'fire'.

Mary Chinery Hesse says that

“Equality of opportunity and treatment for women has yet to be achieved in many societies. A woman with a physical or mental disability faces a double handicap although some progress has been made in improving the status of women in general; disabled women have remained a largely ignored group”

Women with disabilities are more vulnerable to neglect and physical, sexual and mental abuse they do not have time lag. This vulnerability in turn compels the disabled women to look for male protection and thus seek marriage. But unfortunately:

The society regards disabled women as non sexual. They are not considered suitable for marriage... in India, marriages are mostly arranged. A disabled woman gets disqualified for marriage on account of her handicap. If marriage ever takes place a number of compromises are made. Either they are married to much older men or widowers...in most cases non disabled men get married to disabled women but the reverse is not true. The dowry demanded by men and offered by the families of the disabled women is exorbitant. Disabled women are considered incapable of bearing healthy children. Society undervalues women with disabilities. She is not considered as ideal child or an acceptable person as an adult, is unfit as an employee, unsuitable as a wife, incapable as a mother.(Baquer and Sharma).

In our Indian mythology one being the one eyed orthopedically impaired maid servant of queen kaikeyi in 'Ramayana' called Manthara who was responsible for lord Rama's exile. According to a katha recited during the month of kartik poornima goddess 'Laxmi' had an elder sister who could not marry because of being dark and disfigured. When lord Vishnu proposed to laxmi she expressed her inability as her elder sister was still unmarried. Instead she urged him to marry her sister lord Vishnu refused saying that there is no place for such people in heaven. But he would help her solve her problem and married her elder sister to a peep tree which he said was form of Vishnu.

Films like Koshish and Khamoshi have successfully portrayed hearing and speech impaired characters and were also successfully in sensitizing the masses. In 'Sparsh' Naseerudin Shah playing the character of a visually impaired principal of a blind school and Shabana Azmi who is not disabled which suggests what is expected of woman in society. Even in 'Mann' Priya after she meets with an accident thinks that she is not suitable for dev. A disabled woman is not accepted but a disabled man is accepted.

The cinema presents women as an object of male desire and potential possession. Equally significant is the defecation of women in certain social roles, the pure virgin, and the loyal and obedient wife, the mother and on the other side 'Pakeezah' prostitute. The projection of the Muslim women in Hindi cinema, we find that they stand dully marginalized. Muslim centered films Pakeezah, Nikaah, Bazaar, and Umrao Jaan. In 'Pakeezah' both the mother and the daughter are forced by circumstances to become prostitutes. In 'Umrao Jaan' Amiran is kidnapped and sold in the flesh market. In 'Nikaah' Nilofer belongs to an average middle class family gets married to a Nawab but is promptly divorced many times.

From times immemorial women have been proving their chastity right from Sita who had to prove it to her husband lord Rama. In the novel 'Nagamandala' by Girish Karnad the female protagonist had to prove her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake pit.

In second sex, Simone De Beauvoir has commented,

“Marriage has always has been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them”

Beauvoir observed is the only option offered to woman.” Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society”

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