



GENDER ROLES IN POSTMODERN WORLD AS REFLECTED IN MASS MEDIA AND LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 50 years, gender roles have undergone a variety of changes all over the world. Not only have women got a stronger, active and important role to play in the society, men have also shouldered some of the responsibilities of household chores and looking after the children. This portrayal has been reported from time to time in various newspaper articles and reports. But there is one medium that has represented it both over a period of time as well across various nations. It is the mass media. This paper traces the change in the gender roles in the post modern world as represented in mass media mainly television soaps and cinema of India and the United States, the two biggest democracies of the world. An analysis of some of the films and television soaps provides us with sufficient proof on the change of the gender roles in the society. Women have a stronger role to play; men are no longer doing things which are strictly 'masculine'. Television serials as well as films are now being produced keeping in mind women as consumers; as a result of which there has been the evolution of chick flicks and television soaps with powerful matriarchs. Moreover, transgender people as well as people belonging to the gay community have also got some space on television as well as cinema. Earlier these people were an object of ridicule both in the society as well as mass media. But over the years, it has been seen that they are no longer looked down upon. This paper looks at the development of all these issues citing examples from various Hollywood and Hindi films as well as American and Indian soaps and sitcoms.

INTRODUCTION

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Postmodernism has infinite implications for different kind of people and entails a variety of subjects under the sun. Going by the etymology of the term, we trace the coinage of the word 'Postmodern' to the British historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee in the context of Architecture. Defining a date for the beginning of the postmodern era would be unfair to the spirit of postmodernism that does not believe in the idea of absolutes. Therefore, roughly speaking, the time after World War II (1945) or 1950 onwards is taken to be the beginning of the postmodern period.

The idea of gender roles goes back to the time of the Stone Age and the hunter gatherer role of man. Man was the breadwinner while women stayed in the caves and looked after the children. With the development of civilization the roles of men changed while that of women remained relatively similar. Men were supposed to fight for the country (e.g., in Sparta and other civilizations); the role of women was to produce these fighters for the nation. Thus there has been a dichotomy in the definition of roles of men and women. Even as late as the Victorian Age we have the Poet Laureate of England Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem "The Princess" state:

*Man for the field and women for the hearth
Man for the sword and for the needle
she Man with the head and woman with the heart
Man to command and woman to obey
All else confusion (Tennyson, 124).*

It is said that art imitates life. Some people on the other hand also believe that art inspires life. Going by both these sayings we could conclude that while on one hand art portrays that which happens in real life, on the other hand, it also portrays what could and should happen in real life. Art provides human beings some of the ideal situations and characters to aspire for which they no longer see in real life. It is because of this instinct of man that epics and legends are so popular with everyone, especially children. Young children aspire to become superheroes and sometimes mythical characters like Hercules, Perseus, Krishna and Hanuman. In Indian television soaps, the sight of joint families is a common phenomenon. However, in reality mostly in urban population, there are only nuclear families and a very few joint families. These soaps are very popular with the urban female population. It could be ascribed to the idea of the unconscious desire of the people of India to live in joint families.

In this paper we look at how gender roles have been portrayed in popular cinema and television both in India and in English speaking countries mainly America.

Changing Gender Roles on Indian Television and Films

TV Soaps

Indian Television is also one of the media that have witnessed a number of changes in the portrayal of the members of both the genders. Way back till the 1980s the role of the male



was traditional, patriarchal and that of a breadwinner. Women on the other hand were shown on two extremes, viz., either Rajni or Bhagwanti. Bhagwanti was the typical Indian housewife in the first Indian soap opera Hum Log. She was shown to be a dedicated housewife who spent all of her time in the kitchen. On the other hand, there was Rajani named after its protagonist who was a representative of the 'New Woman'. Another woman character that gave a strong identity to the women of India was Udaan portraying Kalyani as the protagonist. It was believed to be loosely inspired by the life of Kanchan Choudhary, the elder sister of Kavita Choudhary (Kalyani) who went on to become an IPS in spite of much hardships.

Despite some of these exceptions, men continued to dominate the Indian Television for a long time. Women were merely used to serve as a pleasing sight for the eyes. But in the nineties with the advent of cable television, the programme producers decided to change their strategy. With television catering to the views twenty four seven, they shifted their consumer base to women and children. Programmes for children were later discontinued as a result of the advent of Play-station, Cartoon channels, the Internet and finally the social networking sites like Orkut and Facebook. The viewership comprised mostly of women, mainly housewives. Targeting this viewer group, the producers like Balaji Telefilms rolled out soaps that were telecast not on a weekly basis like the good old Doordarshan ways but on a daily basis. The focus also shifted from the male protagonists in television serials of the nineties like Junoon and Swabhimaan where there were family rivalries and women played an active role in the enmity and politics.

One of the most significant TV serials that started this trend was Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi (since the mother-in-law was also once a daughter-in-law 2000-2008). In this serial the role of the male characters was minimal. The soap revolved round three characters Tulsi Virani (played by Smriti Irani), her mother-in-law Savitri Virani and Baa, the grandmother of the house. A vast majority of the decisions in the serial were taken by women who focused not only playing an important role in the functioning of the household but also the family business. With this serial and Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki (2000-2006), it came to be said that matriarchy in Indian families had come of age. The family schedule of each house was dictated by the timings of these soaps. Men were said to have lost access to television sets during the timings of these soaps. Some of the other matriarchs on TV soaps besides Tulsi Virani in Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi are Kokila Modi in Saathiya and Bhabo in Diya Aur Bati Hum. Besides the presence of a powerful matriarch, Diya Aur Bati Hum is significant for one more reason which is the theme. In this series the protagonist Sandhya Rathi who is a very studious and a brilliant girl is married off in haste after the death of her parents by her brother to Sooraj Rathi, the son of Bhabo. Sooraj is only educated till the ninth standard and is a sweet maker. Sandhya wants to be an IPS officer while her mother in law wants her to be a housewife. The plot progresses with the husband supporting the wife to pursue her dream. He supports her at every step and is even forced to leave home by his

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mother. The theme of the soap is that if there can be a woman behind a man's success, a man could also do the same for a woman.

Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin (There is no one like Jassi), a soap on Indian television redefined the gender roles as well as image of young Indian girls. Inspired by the Colombian drama Yo Soy Betty, La Fea (Ugly Betty) this serial broke the stereotype of beauty and sex appeal being the essential qualities for a woman to be successful especially on camera. Jasmeet Walia 'Jassi' played by Mona Singh is an ordinary, less than plain looking middle class girl who wears large spectacles and braces on her teeth. Her sense of dressing up is also less than perfect. She secures a job in a company that designs and manufactures clothes. She wins the hearts of her boss and colleagues due to her intelligence and good humoured nature. Later she takes over the company as well and is a great success. The serial was immensely popular with the Indian audience cutting across all age groups and classes.

A very important aspect would be missed if one would exclude the popular reality show Bigg Boss on Colours TV. In 2012, during the sixth season of the show, one of the contestants Imam Siddique who is a fashion stylist gained immense popularity with the Indian audience despite the fact that he confessed to being gay. There was no prejudice in the minds of the masses due to his sexuality. He was so popular that he was being made to host a show Timeout with Imam on MTV India.

Looking at some of the above series, it can be said that the Indian audience especially women are getting ready for accepting the change in the gender roles which were traditionally defined and prescribed by the society.

News Channels and Radio

Indian women on News Channels as well as Radio have also gone through a rapid transformation in the last two decades. Till the 1980s, women news readers and news presenters like Salma Sultana, Rini Khanna, Usha Albuquerque and Avinash Kaur Sareen on Doordarshan were a epitome of femininity. Most of them represented docility and serenity which were essentially feminine qualities. But with the advent of cable television and the mushrooming growth of the news channels, India stood witness to a change in the overall approach to TV journalism. The role of women was not limited to decent presentable faces reading from the teleprompter. It was replaced by the go-getters who were not afraid of asking 'offensive' and bold questions to politicians, bureaucrats and laying them threadbare. The Indian news channels also saw the rise of women reporters who were not afraid of going on the warfront and getting live, raw footage during the Kargil war of 1999. Hence it can be argued that on television in this era, there is no difference between the members of either gender. Not only are women anchors and reporters causing the lines dividing the genders to blur but they are also giving young women and girls new role models to aspire for. Thus

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instead of thinking of going either into teaching or into becoming air stewardesses, the mass media has opened the avenues of journalism as well.

Another avenue that has given new roles for girls and women to aspire for is the FM radio. Instead of having to reach a mature age and undergo the bureaucratic red tape to get selected in the government radio channels, young girls have various opportunities available in private radio stations as a Radio Jockey or various other roles like Script Writers and Copy Editors.

Indian Films

Indian Cinema comprises a number of films that are produced every year in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, Punjabi and other regional languages. This paper will briefly deal with Hindi Cinema often popularly referred to as Bollywood which according to some veteran actors is a misnomer. After the first Hindi film Raja Harishchandra (1913) by Dada Saheb Phalke, Indian cinema has seen a large number of changes in the depiction as well as the gender roles. The much hyped and talked about role of Nargis in Mother India (1957) shows a single mother trying to raise her three children all by herself by tilling the land. She even shoots her son who tries to molest a village girl. Another remarkable role of a single parent has been played by the comedian Mehmood in Kunwara Baap (1974).

In Indian society, the woman was considered weak and ownership was necessary to protect her. Women who were widowed had a pathetic life to live despite the widow remarriage being encouraged by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. One film which proved to be a milestone in terms of this theme is Prem Rog (1982). Devdhar (Rishi Kapoor) eventually succeeds in marrying his childhood sweetheart Manorama (Padmini Kolhapore) who is a widow despite strong opposition from the society.

In Indian cinema the amorous relationships between elderly women and young men has also been depicted of late in films like Dil Chahta Hai (2001) and BA Pass (2013). Women centred films also seem to be in vogue these days with films like Kahaani (2012), Bhumika (1977), Arth (1982), Mirch Masala (1987), Aastha (1997),

Astitva (2000), Lajja (2001), Dor (2006), The Dirty Picture (2011) and the much controversial film Fire (1996). In Fire, the two women are shunned by their husbands and they become lovers finding solace in each other's arms.

Changing Gender Roles in Hollywood Films and American Television

Hollywood Films

Hollywood is one of the greatest producers of films both commercial and those belonging to parallel cinema. Over the years since 1912 when the motion picture industry was set there,



Hollywood films have seen a huge change in portraying the social conditions of America and as well as some other parts of the world. One of the greatest differences in the movies of the past and the movies of present is the portrayal of heroes. In the eighties and the nineties, the heroes that were popular had bulging biceps and a macho image. They toyed with guns and artillery and took on hundreds of goons all by themselves. Some of the actors who epitomized this genre are Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, Hugh Jackman, and Wesley Snipes to name a few. Now over the years films have defined and redefined the gender roles in a rather interesting manner at two levels.

The first is that Women play the role of action heroes in many films, some of the most significant ones are Charlie's Angels and Lara Croft: Tomb Raider . In Charlie's Angels (2000) and its subsequent sequel Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle (2003) starring Cameron Diaz, Lucy Liu and Drew Barrymore there are three young women who work for a 'mysterious boss' named Charlie and indulge in all sorts of 'macho' activities that would put men to shame. This does not mean that these women do not have the traditional charm of the fair sex. When required these women make no qualms about using their feminine sexuality for their mission. It would be worth mentioning here that this film was based on the original TV series Charlie's Angels which was telecast on ABC from 1976 to 1981.

Angelina Jolie, Mila Jovovich and Hillary Swank are some of the actresses who have taken up action roles in Hollywood films. Angelina Jolie plays a car thief in Gone in 60 Seconds. She lives with men in places which are not traditionally suitable for the fair sex and follows a life of crime actively. Her role in this film is not traditional, yet to some extent it can be labeled marginal. However, in an action-adventure fantasy Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001), and its sequel Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life (2003) Jolie plays the lead role and breaks the traditional image of women only serving as an accomplice in crime or the love interest of the action hero. She goes on the missions of recovering lost artifacts and takes on an army of goons single handedly. The male characters mainly Bryce plays a subsidiary role as her assistant. Some of the other films of Angelina Jolie where she takes up the roles which were traditionally thought to be fit for men only are The Tourist (2010), Wanted (2008), Salt (2010) and The Bone Collector (1999). In Mr. and Mrs. Smith (2005) Jolie and Brad Pitt play the role of a couple who pretend to each other to be 'normal' but in reality are highly trained secret agents. The power dynamics and the switch in the gender roles from time to time truly reveal the changing nature of gender roles in the modern era.

Kill Bill (2003) and Kill Bill Volume 2 (2004) starring Uma Thurman in the lead role depicts a woman identified as 'The Bride' wielding a special Japanese sword and avenging the death of her husband and unborn child. In this film the woman breaks the ultimate symbolic barrier between the genders by brandishing a sword and also using it to kill her enemies. To some Freudian critics, the protagonist using the sword means fulfilling the ultimate phallic fantasy.

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In *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) Geena Davis takes up the role of mother and a wife who is suffering from amnesia. She finds out about her real identity, a CIA assassin as a result of a car accident. Geena Davis has the lead role while the other characters mainly Samuel Jackson has a subsidiary role. Same is the case with the films in the *Resident Evil* series starring Mila Jovovich in which the protagonist Alice as a result of mutation and evolution gets gravity defying superpowers. The action sequences as well as the stunts performed in the film defy all conventions of behavior ascribed to the feminine gender.

The above actresses and films are a huge departure from traditional action films where the adrenaline secretion was the prerogative of the male. The female only played the love interest or the wife of the hero.

Action adventure is not the only genre where the gender roles are being redefined and changing in this era in films. In terms of sexuality, the roles are changing as well. Women play a more active role in initiating the discourse on sex. This is not limited only to the woman attracting or seducing the male by her sex appeal. The woman goes out of her way to ask for sex. In *Disclosure* a woman sexually harasses a man. Tom Sanders (Michael Douglas) is initially invited by Meredith Johnson (Demi Moore), a former girlfriend for sex. When Tom resists, she forces herself upon him. She later alleges sexual harassment to frame him but Tom takes legal counselling and sues Meredith for sexual harassment in a court of law. Ultimately justice prevails and it is ruled that the woman did harass the man sexually. Hence sex and sexual harassment in the film is not only about gender or fulfilling biological needs of the individual, it is much more than that. It is about power and control.

Speaking of power and control, the producers have also realized the power of the female audience and started a totally new genre of films at the female audience. Such films are known as 'Chick Flicks' or 'Belle centric films'. The chief characteristics of such films include the focus on relationship, the use of a female protagonist, recurrent use of the colour pink as a symbol of femininity. The theme of such films is generally the girl trying to assert her identity or find the love of her life. With the spectacular success of *Twilight* series of films, the term 'chick flicks' has been replaced with 'girl power flick'. Some of these films include *Sixteen Candles* (1984) the story of a teenage girl going through an identity crisis on her sixteenth birthday, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Sex and the City* (2008), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *The Notebook* (2004), *Mean Girls* (2004) and *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989).

Gender Roles on American Television

If some medium has really captured the pulse of the society and has portrayed with greater accuracy the truer picture of the society, it is the American Television. Most of the sitcoms, soaps and dramas have portrayed reality across various sections of the society. The role of



men and women as well as people with no gender has also been taken up on American Television. It also includes the homosexuals in the mainstream.

Yvonne Strahovski in the television series Dexter plays the role of a mysterious woman Hannah McKay a 'sensitive sociopath' who once in her teens went on a killing spree with her boyfriend. At present she is the love interest of the protagonist Dexter who is a serial killer who murders people with criminal records that law is unable to punish. She specializes in killing people by giving them an untraceable poison in drinks and condiments. Dexter's sister Deborah Morgan (played by Jennifer Carpenter) who is a detective in Miami Metro Homicide department also plays the role of a police officer who is aggressive, belligerent and a brave woman. The striking thing about this series is that while the sister is an authoritative and aggressive policewoman, the brother on the other hand is a silent lab technician (just on the surface). In the same series there is a Latino couple Sergeant Angel Batista (played by David Zayas) who dates and later is marries to Captain María LaGuerta (played by Lauren Vélez). What is a little different about this couple is that the husband works under the authoritative wife in the police department. Later the wife divorces the husband just because he is not ambitious.

Yvonne also takes up the role of a CIA agent in the series Chuck. Her task as Sarah Walker in Chuck is to guide and protect the computer nerd Chuck portrayed by Zachary Levi. The missions are controlled by a woman named Brigadier General Diane Beckman (Bonita Friedericy). It is indeed a change in the conventional roles of women to see them in military and intelligence organizations and also occupying top positions.

In one of most popular 'dramedy' (comedy drama) mystery series of American Television Desperate Housewives, we see quite a number of different gender roles of both men as well women. Tom Scavo (played by Doug Savant) plays the role of a stay-at-home father to four children while his wife Lynette (played by Felicity Huffman) returns to her career in advertising. It is shown in the series that she is more successful than her husband. While Tom tries to be supportive most of the times, yet the male ego does kick in at times. Lynette is also seen to be multitasking making her a 'superwoman'. But at times she does break down due to all the stress this has on her as a person. A gay couple from Chicago—Lee McDermott (Kevin Rahm) and Bob Hunter (Tuc Watkins) also come to inhabit Wisteria lane in the fourth season. They live in the neighbourhood like normal heterosexual couples. One of the protagonists Bree's (played by Marcia Cross) son Andrew Van de Kamp also has queer inclinations. But after a while he is accepted into the family by his mother who is a very religious Catholic woman. Another interesting episode of the series is Eva Longoria as Gabrielle Solis (a married woman) pulling an affair successfully with her gardener John Rowland (Jesse Metcalfe), a teenage boy who is much younger to her.

Speaking further about the representation of the gay community on American Television the series Modern Family depicts Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), a lawyer, and his partner, Cameron (Eric Stonestreet) having adopted a Vietnamese child, Lily (Aubrey Anderson-Emmons). The three are shown to be family in every sense.

There is one instinct which was traditionally attributed to the male sex for a long time—revenge. If either of the parents was wronged by the villain in cinema or on television, the son was seen to be avenging that wrong. However, in the past few years both on television and in popular cinema, the mantle has been passed to the daughters. The most significant among them is a televised series Revenge in which Amanda Clarke played by Emily Vancamp is on an all out mission to destroy the Grayson family that had framed her father for a terrorist act he did not commit. There are other interesting things also in the series; one of them being Victoria Grayson (Madeleine Stowe) portrayed as a powerful matriarch. Sexual preferences in the modern age have also been depicted in Revenge. Emily's aide Nolan Ross played by Gabriel Mann and Daniel Grayson's friend Tyler Barrol played by Ashton Holmes are bisexuals. The two of them are also lovers for some time.

Men are not the only ones to have been shown experimenting with their sexuality. Women have also shown to be doing the same in the TV soaps. In Grey's Anatomy women are shown to be trying their hands at lesbianism. It is seen that orthopaedic surgical resident Callie Torres (portrayed by Sara Ramirez) is a married lesbian who experiments time and again with her sexuality, sometimes dating men and at other times sleeping with women.

One of the most interesting things which is seen in the American TV serials with respect to gender roles is friendship between people belonging to opposite sex. The question has always been asked if it is possible for a man and a woman to be 'just friends' or remain connected at a platonic level. The answer in most of the cases is a big no because the sexual tension always remains and either of the parties (mostly men) succumb to the charms of the other. It is seen largely in one of the most successful TV series of all times Friends in which Rachael (Jennifer Aniston) and Ross (David Schwimmer) are friends along with four other friends who hang out in a coffee shop and share apartments. Ross and Rachael have a complicated relationship. They tend to become friends and switch to being lovers off and on till the end of the series. There is another character Joey Tribbiani (Matt LeBlanc) with whom Rachel shares an apartment. Joey and Rachael are also friends but Joey starts developing romantic feelings for Rachael. When she tries to reciprocate and they want to make it physical, Joey backs out because he cannot endanger his friendship with Rachael for her love. It is, therefore, seen that the relationship between men and women need not necessarily be that of husband and wife or that of lovers but they can be friends as well (despite the fact that in many cases relationships are complicated by amorous feelings of either of the two).

CONCLUSION

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The changing gender roles and the sexual dynamics both at home and at workplace as depicted in the films and also on television both in India as well as the US have been analyzed here. Also the state of flux in the gender equations in the society has also been discussed to some extent. If one was to do a causal analysis of the same one would find out a number of them. One of the biggest causes is time. Time has been said to be greatest leveler after death.

Over the past 150 years, the society has changed to a great extent. Due to the influences of Modernity (read not Modernism) women's education and empowerment have received a lot of thrust and focus. Due to various reform movements as well as legislations being passed world over, women have reached a status at par with that of their male counterparts. In many countries even the final frontier, i.e., women enlisting as soldiers in Infantry has also been crossed. In many areas women outdo men. As a result the male female interaction is not only limited to the four walls of the house but has extended to office cubicles, roadside, marketplace and in the virtual world as well. So a woman is no longer seen only as a dependent individual or the property of someone but as someone independent and to some extent a comrade in an organization. Due to this dilution in the boundaries of the well defined roles for either gender in this era, viz., the Postmodern world have changed to a great extent.

As a result of this leveling in workplace, the language used in public, writing as well as media has undergone a rapid makeover. People are advised to use language which is gender sensitive, non-sexist and non-offensive to people with either or no gender at all. Some of the examples are using the word actor for both male and female actor, workforce for workmen and chairperson instead of chairman in workplace. In academic discourses as well the use of one gender throughout is discouraged. Hence instead of using one personal pronoun like he throughout one is advised to use 's/he'. With the LGBT movement gaining momentum and people asking for equal rights for the transgender people, the use of the work 'person' is being preferred instead of man or woman or man/woman.

The second cause for the change of the gender roles is the movement of the world economy from agrarian to industrial and ultimately post industrial economy at present. The rapid growth of service sector has opened a number of avenues for both men and women. It has also given equal opportunities to men and women.

As a result of the above causes, women in the postmodern world have achieved something which they did not ever have in the history of mankind which Virginia Woolf chose to call A Room of One's Own, i.e., a personal space and economic independence. As a result of this both the genders now have power and the interaction between the two is for sharing power rather than one gender wielding power over the other or only one gender calling the shots. Sometimes in a marriage, the only bone of contention between couples is not being able to decide who wears pants in the house.

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Another cause which is the result of the post-industrial economy and the rise of towns and metropolis is the breakdown of the traditional family structure from joint family to nuclear family and further into a single parent family. In more advanced countries like the Scandinavian countries and some states of the US the definition of family is different from a traditional nuclear family. Instead of mother, father and children, a family could have two parents belonging to the same gender and adopt children.

Hence modernity, coupled with strong legislations for social equality of the genders accompanied by advancement in information technology can be said to be responsible for the changes that have been seen in the interactions between genders seen till date.

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Disclaimer: A part of this paper was earlier published in the form of a chapter in a book entitled *Gender Roles in Postmodern World* edited by Dr. Alka Singh, published by Yking Books Jaipur in 2014.