

Films and Gender Predilections: A Look into Bollywood's Shifting Directorial Narratives

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Dr. Sudheer S. Salam

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Film Studies, Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Tirur, Kerala, India

Abstract

Cinema, the greatest art of the twentieth century, emerged the most popular medium of mass consumption not only by playing a key role in the creation and moulding of opinions, but also by constructing images that reinforce dominant cultural values. When the processes of movie making was largely controlled and mediated by the male directors, actors and technicians, they inadvertently transferred the patriarchal values they believe in, to the functioning and hierarchy of the film industry and in the narratives they construct. The second wave feminism and associated movements gradually changed the way in which the film narratives were created. More and more female authors who entered the film world managed to do the maximum to hit upon a bias-less world, with agency in their films, which appeared to have changed the world view of how the gender should be treated in public and society. This study tries to find the parallels of this trend in Hindi films, as more and more female filmmakers are out there into Indian parallel and commercial film making.

Key words

Bollywood, Gender, Patriarchy, New wave

Introduction

The biggest and oldest in the world in terms of production and audiences, the Indian film Industry with its multitude of regional industries has now acquired a global appeal. (Mazumdar, 2007). Clocking revenues of around 160 billion in 2015, it shows an average growth of 13-14 percent annually. On an appreciative note, Indian government even relaxed its economic policy to grant it, together with the entertainment sector, an 'Industry status' which allows ready finance and clean credits for film making from global conglomerates.

A decade back, the filmed entertainment sector amounted to only INR 110 billion in size in 2008. The expansions of multiplex screens, DTH channels, HD quality and multitudes of TV channels have been readily fuelling the demand for increased filmy content. The growing diaspora of Indian audiences across places like China, Russia, the Middle East, and Africa has also made it the one which influence every trend in music, fashion and life styles across the world. Infact, India cinema, particularly the Hindi cinema has never enjoyed as much influences as it has today.

Correspondence: Email: sudheershaah@gmail.com

Though the Indian Cinema Industry is often represented by "Bollywood" , in reality it does not encompass various kinds/industries of Indian cinema. Cinema Industry has been majorly divided into two broad categories from the sixties onwards, namely the art (parallel/new wave) and commercial cinema (Pendakur 2003). Later a new genre-the middle brow cinema- also found space in Hindi cinema and in other Indian languages.

Women have been given a higher position than men in the ancient Indian scriptures, but in reality the case is just the opposite (Altekar 1955). Sons are preferred over daughters in most parts of the country which leads to a preferential treatment to boys in families, right from their birth. Demographic trends also demonstrate that there is deep-rooted gender inequity that starts with prenatal sex determination which leads to female foeticide . Such a male dominated society which considers women inferior to men even prohibits them to make decisions in their personal life or to the selection of livelihood, in majority of the villages. This unequal treatment of women is reflected in the media in general. Naturally the largely conservative Indian film industry very regressive in the ideals it upholds. The severely male-dominated (Ganti, 2004) filmy work space doesn't have much women names in its list of directors or producers. Women who pursue a career within the industry are limited mostly to actresses, writers, costume designers or playback singers. Except in the case of actors, no other professionals from the above list doesn't have much to do in actual production phase of movies, and this has continued as such with very modest changes over the years .

In Bollywood, the number of women involved in cinematography, art direction and editing are negligible (Dasgupta, 2011). According to a report by Geena Davis Institute (2014),the ratio of gender in Indian Film Industry stands at 6.2 males to every female, and only less than one-in-every ten directors is a woman(9.1 %). The percentage of the women writers and producers are 12.1% and 15.2% respectively, making 'film production related job's a strenuous decision for ladies.

The role of agency in women's lives also need to be considered while analysing the women representation behind films. 'Agency' according to Ritzer (2005) is the capacity of individual humans to act independently in active roles (Caplan,2009) and to make their own free choices. The feminist review of films has always focused on the role of agency in the lives of women and on 'male gaze- the much reviewed concept put forth by Laura Mulvey in her seminal work 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). The conventional patriarchy in the industry together with the limitations imposed by the family and society thus set further hurdles for ladies behind screen in Indian filmdom.

The main proposition of this paper to check how far the representation of women in the Indian film industry has changed in the last two decades and how this new visibility of women film makers have ultimately resulted in showcasing more emotionally and economically independent women on celluloid, devoid of any predilections.

The Traditional Filmy Moulds.

The narratives of a most of the Hindi films revolve around men and their heroics. At the same time the Manichean dualism in Indian cinema presents women in one dimensional characters- either as good or bad. The dutiful mothers, (whose attributes are matched to that of the supreme form of feminine energy, the Goddess) loyal daughters, and obedient, respectful wives who hardly questions men find opposites intainted, stereotypical 'vamp' or the 'other women' who shows disregard to tradition. (Gokulsing & Dissnayake (2004). The later may be presented as westernised, drinking, partying and is promiscuous with all offensive unacceptable behaviours, as far as patriarchal Indian standards.

As Ryan and Kellner (1988) pointed out, films are consistently implicated by the politics of culture within which they are produced. But even when it shows tendency of changes with imperialist cultural values projected through advertisements and foreign films which finds audience in India, the ideal image of Indian womanhood has displayed notable equivalence through ages, with images of Pativrata, Sita and Savitri- obedient, submissive, sacrificing, sentimental, superstitious women incompetent of rational action, with their primary duty being the total dedication to husband. The other regularly applauded filmy image was that of the glorified Motherhood- 'Bharat Matha Image' which also has got broad approval. In India, fundamentalist forces at home also try to erase spaces of difference and likely interventions and construct a monolithic representation of women gender across the nation.

The glorification of the image of ideal Indian woman as tolerant to the unfairness and brutality meted out towards her by men and society has been the criterion components of commercial Hindi cinema. (Dasgupta and Hegde 1988)- a formula religiously followed by other language film industries as well across the country. The women in these movies, in most cases, do not have any substantial role to play (Acharya 2004). Taglines and punch line dialogues that insult and belittle women has been a standard component in many language film industries, which also work as one element to glorify the hero.

The stereotypical portrayal of the ideal Indian woman in commercial Hindi films has been a matter of concern amongst Indian feminists (Das Gupta 1996). As pointed out earlier, the process of globalisation had simplified image making, isolating it from a historical or social context. An alternative approach has been the emergence of independent films that reveal issues of anxiety of women from a gynocentric perspective. And naturally the effort to continually find spaces and intervene with a difference is a survival strategy which works - and the effort is ongoing (Datta, 2000). The need of the hour thus becomes 'feminist engagement with global as well as local/situational ideological, economic and political processes, and the urgency of transnational, cross cultural feminist dialogue in building an ethical and egalitarian culture capable of withstanding the commoditised, exploitative practices of global capital.' (Ghosh and Bose, 1997)

Film Criticism and Associated Changes

It was the studies on women's identity as portrayed in cinema that paved the root for the second wave feminism and the development of associated theories, way back in 1960's and 1970's. The objections to mainstream cinema's stereotypical portrayal of women began in the 1960's (Abbas & Sathe 1985) As it turned an eye opener about the kind of woman representations and its possible results in society, films were then stated as one of 'the great storehouses of society's stereotypes about women' (Blewett, 1974) which needs to be manoeuvred for larger societal good. Questioned by a few directors, known as the "new wave" group (Das Gupta 1996), who were inspired from the traditions of Italian neo-realism and their style of filmmaking (Bindford, 1987) most of their artistic films addressed various real issues like poverty and numerous forms of exploitations, while some focussed on topics concerning women. (DasGupta 1996).

The alternative genre of films (parallel/new wave) has been a trend in Indian Cinema from the late sixties (Pendakur 2003). In their films, instead of portraying women as an object of male desire, they were shown as "products of diverse social formations, trying to overcome their sordid circumstances, who were caught in the contradictory pulls of tradition and modernity, past and present, and individuality and modernity' (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004).

Apart from the likes of Shyam Benegal and Mrinal Sen, women's issues and characters were meticulously examined and constructed by some female directors as well, most notably Aparna Sen, Kalpna Lajmi, and Sai Paranjpye (*Sparsh*, *Katha*, *Chasme Budhoor*, *Disha*). An irony to these efforts were the observations by certain feminist critiques that, even those films portraying women's issues made by the most liberal and impartial directors in India still presented some proportion of patriarchal tendencies.

The Women who Call the Shots :

In the long history of commercial Indian films, from the passive wife of Dada Saheb Phalke's Raja Harishchandra to the best stereotypic Indian mother of Mother India, and to the liberated souls of the 21st century heroines, the ladies in Indian screens took a challenging journey to emerge resourceful and to reclaim their own voice. The traditional suffering, voiceless female actor was largely helped in this journey by the parallel/art film makers in India who took significant steps to give realistic life to their lead female protagonists/actor.

Andre Bazin who headed a significant movement as French New Wave always gave thrust to the fascination of the artistically mediated reproduction of physical reality. But 'locating the characters and action in a determinate and social setting' as Bazin has cited, was not in itself weighed to give relief to the 'second sex' in India, as much of their stories may not have brought in a relief or support to already oppressed gender of the country. This made it mandatory for the story tellers to add their own pitches of valour that could support and methodology cater to the escalation of measures for equal opportunity of women. Siegfried Kracauer, in his writings on realism and cinema holds that "films may claim aesthetic validity if they build from their basic properties, that is, they thereby recording and revealing physical reality. A film is realistic because it correctly reproduces that part of the real world to which it refers". (Kracauer, 1997). Though this perception of realism is an important factor of cinema, Indian film makers were made indispensable to weave stories, sometimes even hyped ones, that displayed the audacity, spirit and prospects and agency of women. As the women's movement gained strength in India and highlighted women's oppression and a struggle for an egalitarian society - a series of women film makers brought women from the margins to the centre of their texts. An alternate view point and a female gaze brought a focus on female subjectivity. A number of films were made by Sai Paranjpye, Vijaya Mehta, Aruna Raje, Prema Karanth, Kavitha Lankesh and Kalpana Lajmi - which were sensitive portrayals of women protagonists, in search of social and sexual identity, women firmly located in specific socio-historical contexts. The seed of this quest was first sown by the dynamic Aparna Sen in the 80's with "Paroma", where the woman tread the path of so-called "promiscuity" only to gain psychological maturity in the long run. Today, directors like Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and Meghna Gulzar are upright enough to depict 'taboo topics' like lesbianism, polygamy and even surrogate motherhood, where its woman who takes the lead role in proposing, making love and even in deciding to "lease" her womb without the permission of her husband-to-be! While in "Fire", Water' and "Kamasutra", the women brave the world to explore their sexual desires.

As Kracauer argued for descending to the material world (Kracauer, 1974,) rather than projecting an abstract and imaginative world, these female makers not only unveiled the real women who must exhibit their real heroism, but also paved way for the schooling and upcoming of a new generation of female film makers in the new century, who were destined to show more sincerity in portrayal of feminine psyche with real elaan. These new directors have even begun to shine on the global stage with their noteworthy production. The year has Ruchicka Oberoi who won the FEDORA price for best new director at the Venice Film Festival for her debut feature film 'Island City'. Shefali Bhusion whose 'Jugni

‘ follows a female music producer on a journey to rural Punjab, argues that the true challenge to the status quo can be found only in Indian independent cinema because the mainstream film, even when they deal with female protagonists, ultimately glorify the power of man to save the women’.

The new bunch of the film makers of the decade has already narrated tales of female wisdom, presenting them with their real inner voices and as they naturally are. Their movies are always set to pass the representation tests like Mako Mori (Ryan, 2013), Sphinx test, Crystal Gems or Bechdel-Wallace test (Raalte, 2015). Mako Mori test asks for at least one female character in a film who gets her own narrative arc that is not about supporting a man's story. To pass the Bechdel test, the film must have two female characters (preferably named), who talk to each other about something other than a man, while Crystal Gems test is a combination of the above with more strict six criteria. Check for example ‘Lipstick under the Burkha’ by Alankrita Sreevastava which premiered in MIFF, (yet to make a commercial release) centres on four small town Indian women, who assert their personal and sexual rights. Leena Yadav's ‘Parched’ which tells the plight of rural women of Rajasthan had presented the lead ladies as challenging conservative sexual mores. The movie was premiered in 2015 Toronto festival. In both of these films, whenever there is an emphasis given on women sexuality and her sexual desires, there were no underlying denotative meanings, which may ask for a disturbing male gaze and contradictions.

Signposts in the New Century

Among the three decorated female film makers from the eighties, Aparna Sen continued with her filmy endeavours in ‘Mr and Mrs Iyer’, ‘15 Park Avenue’, ‘The Japanese Wife’, ‘Paromitar Ek Din’ and ‘Iti Mrinlini’. Aparna Sen was also honoured with a Padma Shri, for her cinematic achievements. While Mira Nair worked for more movies including ‘Monsoon Wedding’, ‘The Namesake’, and ‘Queen of Katwe’ among her many international projects, she also successfully established her own production house Mirabai films.

One of the pivotal attempts from this line of female film makers to make an impact was Kalpana Lajmi, who made her debut in 1986 with ‘Ek Pal’. Her later films like ‘Rudaali’ and ‘Daman’, both the films were noted for their socially relevant themes. Both these films helped it's lead ladies Dimple Kapadia and Raveena Tandan to earn their maiden National awards for best actresses. *Daman* was about the bitter reality regarding the marital violence that most women face on a regular basis in India. Her 2006 film *Chingari* was about a rural prostitute avenging the death of her lover. Lajmi, in her films meticulously weaved narratives that didn't suggest or allow the viewers feel sorry or be sympathetic towards the female characters, instead she made room for the audiences to feel sympathetic towards the retaliating woman and her actions.

Deepa Mehta with her Indian origins was the critics' heartthrob with her sensational elements trilogy- ‘Fire’, ‘Earth’ and ‘Water’ which talked about issues that were considered taboo in Indian filmy context. She brought forward the idea of lesbianism in her movie *Fire* and widow prostitution in her film *Water*. In *Fire*, the central characters are shown to get occupied in a homosexual relationship by choice, and in the end they choose to leave their home and live with each other. *Water* portrays the guts of a widow to flee out with another younger widow in order to save her from the world of prostitution. In fact, the widow Kalyani played by Lisa Ray commits suicide not because the entire world is aware of her profession, but she strongly feels that it would be unprincipled to let one of her client's son marry her. Deepa's more recent films, ‘Republic of Love’ (2003) and ‘Heaven on Earth’ (2008) has again telling narratives of domestic violence that also keep interests in preserving

the rights of their lead ladies, with the autonomy on their bodies and themselves, never ignored.

Actor turned director Nandita Das made an excellent debut in 'Firaq' in 2002, a sensitive political thriller which told the tales about the aftermath of Gujarat riots. At the same time, Gurinder Chadha hogged limelight with her films like 'Bhaji on the beach', 'Bend it like Beckham' and 'Bride and Prejudice'- all telling tales that are concerned with the India diasporas.

Shonali Bose who started with 'AMU'- a movie about anti-Sikh riots, followed it with a more historic 'Chittagong' telling the uprising in Chittagong against the British rule. Her latest 'Margarita with a Straw'(2015) is a insightful tale about the self discovery of a differently abled person. Kalki Koechlin had her best role till now as the title character which has invited applause from various quarters. Anushka Rizvi's 'Peepli Live' which won at the Durban Film Festival, was an intimate take on farmer suicides and media activism that also found public appeal and success at the Box Office. While Kiran Rao did an artistic 'Dhobi Ghat' featuring her star partner Aamir Khan in the lead Konkana Sen Sharma made a heart-warming 'Death at the Gunj', this year, Tanuja Chandra survived two decades with her fine films like 'Sangarsh', 'Sur' and the new flick on production 'Qarib Qarib Single Single'. Meghna Gulzar was also appreciated for her 'Filhaar' and 'Talvaar' for taking up insightful issues like surrogation and Aarushi murder.

Interestingly, a careful examination of films directed by women shows that female directors explored themes like the question of female identity, power and marginalisation in a male dominated society. However, these films brought forth huge controversy over topics of morality, family structure, and most importantly an attempt to change the society (Gokulsing & Dissnayake, 2004). Although few women directors have tried to make films related to women's issues from the perspective of women, they have not been a huge success. These women directors were more sensitive and brave in their portrayal of women characters and issues. In fact, the women directors had a detailed analysis of certain challenging issues, like fighting against religions, prostitution, and finding ways to live life their way. When compared with that of men, there was a greater tenacity amongst the woman characters from the films of woman directors to emerge as winners even in the most challenging situations

Interestingly, unlike their inspirations, few of the lady directors were also able to find commercial success with many of their ventures in the first decades of the 21st century. For the first time in the history of Bollywood three women directors – Farah Khan, Zoya Akhtar and Gouri Shinde have found a place in the biggest commercial hit lists. Farah Khan with her films like 'Om Shanti Om' and 'Main Hoon Na', has turned the favourite of the box office registry while Zoya Akhtar's films like 'Zindagi Na Mile Doobara', 'Dil Dhadakne Do' and 'Luck by chance' have parcelled atypical Bollywood content into modern packaging, which went well with the masses. Gouri Shinde's films like 'Hello Zindagi' has been appreciated for dealing with issues like mental health of adolescent girl, while her 'English Vinglish' was a take on many lives of the modern times. Reema Khagti is another name of interest to Bollywood commercial cinema with hits like 'Honeymoon Travels'; and the psychological thriller in 'Talash'. Her latest 'Gold' under production also features the industry super star Akshay Kumar.

The study has just listed the major female names of Hindi cinema though makers like Leena Manimekhalai, Manju Borah, Pamela Rooks and Anjali Menon are also doing exceptionally well in regional industry. Though less than a fifty in total numbers, the films by women directors show rare sensitivity in handling issues, and angst experienced by

women that were largely ignored till then. But the major problem faced by them seems to be lack of funding, sound financial backing and hence definite breaks in bringing out films. This seems to be a problem for every female film maker across the world. A story about Hollywood director Patty Jenkins reminds us that it took her ten years to make her third feature film, though her second 'Monster' was a huge hit, also helping it's lead lady in winning the Oscars'. And it took twelve years in between for her to appear in a media interview, that too after her third hit in 'Wonder Women'. If world cinema, which boasts for greater equality in gender couldn't ensure attention to such talented directors, how can Indian industries fare better?

Conclusion

Films made by most liberal, impartial directors often fall into the trap of displaying patriarchal tendencies even while they handle women issues. But in the last decade, there has been a positive change in the film industry regarding women's inclusiveness in the industry and their representation on films. More and more women-centric films are being made, which has changed the way women are being looked upon. The taboo about female sexuality as a matter to be covered up is gradually losing steam, as the innovative experiments from unbiased young film makers, particularly female directors are finding audiences with positive responses. As cinema has been one of the major channels that sensitize the society, responsible film makers who endeavour on these kinds of themes must be appreciated. The right interventions to create a women-friendly atmosphere and optimum workspace for women are a must to encourage more creative talents to come up and eliminate the gender disparity. The real, drastic but appreciable change will occur when women directors find it viable and marketable when they talk about their own stories and about themselves with sincerity. And it will be only then the Indian society as a whole will get enlightened, offering true dignity and agency to women.

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