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Dr. Suprita Jha
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Mata Sundri College,
University of Delhi,
New Delhi, India

Battle of the sexes in the Bollywood: An unremitting tale

Dr. Suprita Jha

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 too in 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. A number of researches have been done on the role of women in different societies. 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. Mainstream Hindi cinema, or Bollywood, has often clustered female characters into a finite number of gendered tropes, from damsels in distress, Hindu goddesses, virtuous wives and mothers, to vamps, molls, vindictive mothers-in-law, and justice-seeking avengers. Recently, women-centric cinema has attempted to depart from such stereotypical portrayals, with movies such as Queen, Pink, and Tumhari Sulu. In past decades, there is no doubt that 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. This article deals with these 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. To bring out the facts, I have adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative method reveals a consistent story depictions across movies. Qualitative method shows that major acts of transformation that radically appeared in the modern times. Overall, the study contributes to understand the contemporary portrayal of female in Bollywood.

Keywords: Bollywood, cinema, India, women, patriarchy, endurance, exploitation, struggle, gender, domination

Introduction

In the 75 years since independence, Indian cinema has gone through a lot of changes including a shift from classic mythological blockbusters to the Modern remake of Hollywood's successful films. Women in the Indian film industry have played an important role in the success of individual film. Their roles however have changed overtime, from being dependent on their male counterparts to very independently carrying the storyline forward. Before referring to the changes, it is relevant to understand the importance of Indian Cinema in the world today. According to studies and survey, Indian films are screened in over a hundred countries and watched by nearly six billion people worldwide. According to the available report, the Indian film industry is considered to be the largest film industry in the world with over 1500 films produced every year in more than 20 languages where Hollywood produces less than 400 films per year. With the highest number of theatre entrances, about 4.5 billion tickets are sold annually in India. Another set of statistics states about 1500 films are made yearly in 120 studios and shown in about 15000 cinema houses to weekly audiences estimated at almost 95 million. The Indian film market gets 95% of its revenue from non-English language films, mostly in Hindi followed by South Indian and other regional language films.

The Indian film industry, a blend of many sub-film industries, is represented by Bollywood which makes films in Hindi, the national language of India. Bollywood and its counterparts function amid a gender gap in terms of stereotype, screen time, pay, and equal opportunities. As the number of women behind the scenes is negligible, their on-screen portrayal has gender bias and fails to explore women's worldviews, sensibilities, perceptions, and other realities. In many films, the women have only small roles apart from the usual showpiece presence in emotionally charged musical sequences which convey physical attraction and romance.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Suprita Jha
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Mata Sundri College,
University of Delhi,
New Delhi, India

The narratives of Hindi cinema are largely male centric and themes are explored from the male audience's point of view. The Indian heroine is usually portrayed in the subservient role of love interest or wife, symbolic of weak stereotypes and secondary to the hero. It is not that feminist films are not made in India, but they usually do not receive the success and audience of commercial films. Top actors in Bollywood earn at least five times more than the top actresses; and films with a male lead make bigger profits at the box office compared to those with a female lead. It seems the audience has almost been tamed into accepting women in typical roles only. The Indian heroine is yearning for change but finds it challenging to break the mold of the past. Scholars suggest that Indian cinema needs to focus more on balancing the women's image instead of repeating stereotypes. Throughout the history of Indian cinema, the story of every hero is incomplete without saving the "damsel in distress"—the heroine. Though the role of women in Indian cinema has been an integral one, the question is, was it an important one or merely a tool to create stereotypes for building a patriarchal empire? With the movie "Kabir Singh" breaking records at the box office and people applauding the protagonist for all the wrong reasons, it is time for a moment of retrospection.

Exposition (An image of endurance)

The women in Indian cinema have evolved over time. Women have mainly played decorative objects in Hindi cinema for a long time. Or, even in films where they had important roles, they are more likely to be portrayed as victims and martyrs or they, too, torture other women! In early days, Indian cinema focused on mythological stories and great epics such as the country's first feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, directed by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913. Initially, the success of the films was entirely dependent on the shoulders of the male artists as majority of the female roles were played by the male artists. During the freedom struggle, cinema was used as a medium to illustrate anger and voice the opinion of nationalist leaders and parties demanding independence from British colonial rule. From this period the female protagonists started playing a very important role in the movies, for example- *Anandmath* based on the novel by Sharadchand Chattopadhyay. However, after independence, cinema became a vehicle for addressing social problems and issues. Bollywood portrayed a society that was both desired and achievable through films. The manner in which women are depicted in mainstream Indian cinema is a combination of a lot of factors. It is a notion based on the director's beliefs, attitudes and values, combined with what the director thinks viewers want to see. What viewers want to watch is something that conforms to their beliefs, attitudes and values, which come from the social framework within which they live, which is the same social framework in which directors, live. The characterization of women in Bollywood sees no greys. Female lead roles may broadly be differentiated between the heroines and the vamps. The heroines or leading ladies of Bollywood were essentially as roles that conform to all social morals and values. The leading ladies have been seen as the epitome of virtue that society possesses and were always ready to sacrifice their happiness for their families. This image was contrasted by that of the vamp who was seen as a sinner and lacked all moral values. This is a very clear contrast. The heroine

could do no wrong and whatever she said spoke of her virtue. This image sat highly exaggerated and stirred reactions of sympathy. The woman of Bollywood was submissive amidst the patriarchal milieu of the plot. Films like "Dahej" (1950), "Devi" (1970), "Biwi ho to Aisi" (1988), "Pati Parmeshwar" (1988) depicted women as passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families. In such a situation, the character is isolated from reality. The female character is most commonly seen struggling to balance her roles as a dutiful mother and wife. Her personal aspirations and desires find no mention in the plot. There are many other examples of gender bias on screen and they are not limited to a particular era of films. For example: in war movies across time, women have been relegated to lovers who keep waiting endlessly for men fighting war. In the movie *Hamara Dil Aapke Paas Hai* (2000), Aishwarya Rai is a rape victim who finds sympathy and love in Anil Kapoor, who shelters her after the incident. As she falls in love with him, she tries to combine multiple roles of a girlfriend, wife and mother to his kids to win his love. In *Vivaah* (2006), Amrita Rao is a young, docile, submissive, suppressed but ideal girl chosen by Shahid Kapoor for marriage. The reason for his choice is the ideal qualities that she possesses. The hero's magnanimity is depicted in the end as he willingly accepts her after a tragic accident that takes place just before marriage.

How real are the women characters in Hindi films? This is something to debate about because values, ideals, principles; morals have dominated the frame-work in which these films are placed. Thus, women rather than being depicted as normal human beings are elevated to a higher position of being ideal who can commit no wrong. Their grievances, desires, ambitions, feelings, perspectives are completely missing from the scene. They are really portrayed as the "other" because they are shown as not belonging to this real and worldly life. For eg: *Abhimaan* (1973) begins with premise of the wife (Jaya Bachchan) being more talented than the husband (Amitabh Bachchan). This in itself is a defiance of the stereotype. However, the film crumbles from then on when the wife gives up her thriving musical career for satisfying the husband's ego culminating to a conventional closure that demands adherence to traditional values of marriage and motherhood. Bollywood heroines have mostly been homely, content to stay happily in the institution of marriage even if educated and keen to carve and identity of "one's own. Where are the women building careers and working professionally? They have been almost silenced. Shahla Raza (2003) talks about how Hindi cinema in the seventies had women in different working roles (Jaya Bachchan as a knife sharpener in 'Zanjeer' and a singer in 'Abhimaan', Hema Malini as a village tonga (horse carriage) driver in 'Sholay' and the general manager of a company in 'Trishul', Rakhee as corporate secretary in 'Trishul' and a doctor in 'Kala Pathar', Vidya Sinha who works in a private firm in „Chhoti Si Baat“).v The working woman vanished from the popular blockbusters of the nineties which relegated Indian women to the boundary of the home. The concern boils down to the embodiment of women who stay next door, walk on the street, spend time working in office and return home after a tiring day. Where are these women in Hindi films? In an era of information overload, it is not too radical to expect some social consciousness from the cinema medium. All this while, there has been discussion

about media's responsibility to the society. So why cinema should be engaged only with creating leisure for its audience and not make them think critically? Popular rhetoric and culture need to be challenged and cinema can do it effectively if it exhibits some sensitivity to gender issues. This is because Hindi films now enjoy a huge international market in many South Asian and Western countries. Thereby, operating in a larger frame-work like this calls for a portrayal of women which is not only accurate but also just to the cause of women empowerment.

It is unusual to witness a strong female character in an action movie even if she indulges in some fights and punches. Where are the Charlie's Angels of Bollywood (2000) and where can we find a character that Angelina Jolie played in SALT (2010)? Bollywood has so far dished out such female characters that the audience has almost been tamed into accepting women in certain kinds of roles only. Another trend to be examined in the depiction of female characters is the clear dichotomy which is followed. The woman is docile, domestic, honourable, noble, and ideal or she is the other extreme – wayward, reckless and irresponsible. Why does Bollywood shy away from taking the middle path? Where are women who are good or bad as per the situation they face in their lives? Where are the women who negotiate with troubles on a daily basis and emerge victorious? In David Dhawan's Biwi no.1 (1999), the wife played by Karishma Kapoor is shown to have sacrificed her successful career to experience domesticated bliss with her husband Salman Khan. When the husband strays, it is the other woman (Sushmita Sen) who is blamed for the same and is demonized all through the film. The husband is absolved of adultery and he returns to his legitimate partner that is the wife at the end of the story. The significance of the title Biwi no.1 is because the wife is successful in bringing the husband back to the domestic arena – seen as the victory of the "traditional" (wife) over the "modern" (mistress/vamp). Such a portrayal has strong moral connotations associated with it. It also shows how two women are pitted against each other to win over the same man, while he enjoys his fling openly. The "man" as the saviour and the "woman" as the victim are also prominently seen in Hindi cinema discourse. The heroine is a damsel in distress who has to be rescued by the hero if she is in trouble. Scene after scene of heroes rescuing their ladies from the clutches of villains have been captured by the camera. It is necessary to understand that such portrayals find rationale in the power structures that govern Indian society. These power structures do not impart any agency to women. The inclination to portray women as ideal stems from the social and cultural context in which we reside. The pre-occupation with the ideal is what defines the goals of Hindi cinema. This ideal allows for only two types of women characters – the good who is to be idealized and the bad who is to be demonized. Most films still cannot sum up the courage to shatter myths of feminine beauty embodied by fair skin, curvaceous figure and glamorous make-up.

Conclusion (Women power)

In earlier mythological classics, women were portrayed as goddesses and daasis, nowadays the times have changed, and women are starring in bold blockbusters, narrating untold stories of women. For instance, the story of the female procurer "Begum Jaan" (2017) starring Vidya Balan in the lead). Recently women-centric movies have swept the theatres. The development of the woman's role in the

industry can be understood by looking into movies like "Raazi", the story of a female Indian spy in Pakistan. No movie maker would have dared to make such a movie ten years ago. Not only on screen, but the prominence of women can also be seen in the technical side of movie-making as well. Women confidently take up the roles of movie directors, technicians, camera persons, etc. Various feminist movements, women rights activists, educated, empowered women, and also women who raise voices for their rights can be given credit for these changes that we see today. Men, too, on various instances, have stood up for women's rights and supported the opportunities that have opened up for them today.

This is majorly due to the shift in audience's awareness of the lack of equality in the storytelling of these movies. With more women involved in the writing process, female perspective and opinions finally began to be explored. Through the exposure awarded by internet and the increasing literacy, the audience grew with more examples of progressive cinema from around the world and began rejecting the idea of a one-dimensional female character, looked at through the lens of a man. There's an inclusion of subjects that have previously been unexplored by mainstream cinema, like female sexuality in Margarita, With A Straw and Lipstick Under My Burkha, for instance.

All this is not to say that today is the Golden Era for women in cinema. This decade has seen the propagation of an unrealistic body standard, especially for women. It was no longer acceptable to just be a woman existing in a movie's universe. The character should have a physique that would look good in a bikini, no matter her profession. One look at the many action blockbusters from recent years will rid any notion that we have finally eliminated the gender inequality issue in Bollywood. Interchangeable female leads in inconsequential roles seem to be a theme in a majority of hit movies.

But there's also the upside. Audiences are now more receptive to female-led movies, like Piku (2015), Neerja (2016), Queen (2014) or Kahaani (2012). More diversity in writing has also led to female audiences responding to seeing a version of themselves onscreen that they haven't before. Badrinath Ki Dulhaniya dealt with another aspect of women dreaming high and dowry system; Tumhari Sulu showed the plight of a normal housewife who digests harsh words from family for conducting night show in radio, and Mom dealt with the courage of a mother. All these celebrated women in various ways. The powerful #MeToo movement is gaining momentum in the industry, but it's too soon to say how sustainable its effect will be on the opportunities and roles for women in Bollywood. The feminism in Bollywood is far from intersectional and the gender balance is still skewed, but we can safely say that the future looks promising.

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