WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA: A CRITICAL VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Cinema, a means of entertainment plays a major role in framing opinions, constructing images and cultural values. It presents a different world to the viewers and is also a means of escape from the harsh realities of the world. Cinema today is also the propagator of gender and identity issues. The portrayal of women in modern films has undergone a change due to the impact of privatization and globalization.

The narratives in Hindi cinema have always been male-dominated and male-centric. Contemporary themes and issues are told and pictured from males' point of view. Women are relegated to a secondary position as compared to the male heroes. A woman's role is charted out in the context of male characters who are always central to the script. They can be any male figure in the form of a hero, the villain, the father figure, boss etc. In the mainstream Hindi cinema, the male is presented as a saviour whereas the woman is the victim. On the other side there are film makers, who have reacted against the stereotypical role of women.

The present paper, while discussing these issues also gives a glimpse of the strong leading woman character in the recently released movie "Queen" (2014) wherein the protagonist Rani aspires to take the decisions of her life and is courageous enough to lead her life as she wishes to.

"Queen" is about a girl from a middle class family from Delhi who wishes to go to Paris on her honeymoon after her fiance walks out of the marriage barely two days before the wedding. The story presents the way in which the protagonist realizes her strength and finally takes important decisions of her life. "Kahani" (2012) featuring Vidya Balan also portrays a strong woman character who fights for her rights. The story highlights the power of a woman and also subverts the stereotypical image of woman.

The paper thus focuses on the portrayal of women characters in Hindi cinema who though bound in the clutches of the patriarchal society, are successful in creating an identity of their own despite the opposition from the males around them.

Complete Paper

Cinema, a means of entertainment plays a major role in framing opinions, constructing images and cultural values. It presents a different world to the viewers and is also a means of escape from the harsh realities of the world. It is also the reflection of the society of the time as well. The method and medium to accentuate this reflection varies from apparels to music to scenic beauty to items of luxury, but the most crucial medium is the characters. The mass is influenced by the thinking, mind-set, apprehensions or the prejudices of the characters portrayed in Indian cinema.

Cinema today is also the propagator of gender and identity issues. Over the years there has been a gradual change in the portrayal of women characters. Either it be Nargis Dutt of *Mother India* (1957), who fights to shackles the social milieu, or it be bold and blood thirsty Priyanka Chopra of *Saat Khoon Maaf* (2011), the change in the thinking and portrayal of woman onscreen is worth noticeable in itself. The audience today is also capable of judging the roles as per the performance of the actors. So in a way it compels the film-makers to work with the script and the characters.

Although there are no set parameters to portray the Indian women onscreen, their roles were very much influenced by the roles which women were expected to play in the society at a particular period of time. Therefore, the journey of women's role in the Indian cinema has been similar to the role of the women in the society itself. The expectations from the ideal women screening in Indian cinema is that to be a submissive, shy, dependent and fragile character who is usually drapped in a traditional wear, whereas the vamps can go for bold outfits. If the woman is shown to be influenced by the western culture than she will be assumed as morally degraded. The same quality if possessed by a man will be symbolic of being heroic.

The narratives in Hindi cinema have always been male-dominated and male-centric. Contemporary themes and issues are told and pictured from males' point of view. Indian movies are usually about heroism where the responsibility to fix all the problems lies with the male protagonist only. Women are relegated to a secondary position as compared to the male heroes. A woman's role is charted out in the context of male characters who are always central to the script. They can be any male figure in the form of a hero, the villain, the father figure, boss etc. In the mainstream Hindi cinema, the male is presented as a saviour whereas the woman is the victim. On the other side there are film makers, who have reacted against the stereotypical role of women.

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There has been a change in the trends of the Indian cinema in the recent years. The shift from the typical Indian movies to the women oriented cinema focus on the role which women is expected to play in the present society. One such movie is "Queen" (2014), which focuses on a self-oriented woman as the chief protagonist who aspires to take the decisions of her life and is courageous enough to lead her life as she wishes to.

"Queen" is about a girl from a middle class family from Delhi who wishes to go to Paris on her honeymoon after her fiancé walks out of the marriage barely two days before the wedding. Rani (Kangana Ranaut) is introduced to the audience as a simple girl without any frills. The events portrayed in the film seem as if depicting the real life gives the life to the script. The protagonists' inner conversations to herself about things like uploading her wedding pictures on Facebook to life-defining events like her 'first night' are instantly likable. Soon enough, her honeymoon plans are thwarted by her fiancé, Vijay (Rajkummar Rao), a foreign-returned engineer who thinks she is not a suitable match for him anymore. For a time it shackles her but inspite of shedding tears for this, Rani decides to give life another chance and sets off on her 'honeymoon' to Paris and Amsterdam all by herself. The Rani, who has never done anything without asking her parents, and has never gone out on a dinner date unescorted by her younger brother, is now a woman who travelled all alone to different cities of the world.

The story presents the way in which the protagonist realizes her strength and finally takes important decisions of her life. While the story presents the realistic picture yet it also manages to keep the audience engaged. As Rani the protagonist in the story go alone on her honeymoon, the film presents the picture of the true emotions of the characters. From a frightened girl in a foreign land to a strong girl who can fights for her rights if required, Queen shows the strength as well as softness, qualities possessed by woman depending on the situation.

Queen highlights the gender discrepancy existing in the Indian society. A well educated and qualified girl leaves a good job opportunity because her boyfriend does not want her to work. It shows the harsh reality of Indian society where many girls willingly or unwillingly sacrifice their career for their families. The cinema thus, portrays the real characters and real situations who have came too close to reality.

The veteran filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt said on the occasion of the International Women's Day, "In India, we can't make sweeping statements claiming that the portrayal of women in Bollywood has progressed or regressed. As a director, I have always made films giving the women center stage. Conservatives and vested groups have often claimed that the women in my recent films have been scantily clad or are overtly sexual. However, they can't deny that the women in my films have been in charge of their own destiny. Now women can live life with dignity, without relying on a man for support."

Kahani (2012) featuring Vidya Balan also portrays a strong woman character who fights for her rights. The story highlights the power of a woman and also subverts the stereotypical

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image of woman. It is remarkable film which showcases the inner strength of a woman and how she is undeterred by situations. *Kahaani* is the story of a pregnant woman, who stes out to search for her missing husband, it shows different obstacles which the protagonist faces and the way she overcomes them. The courage and the determination as shown by the leading woman in the story make the audience awestruck and speechless.

In *Kahaani,* Vidya Balan played Vidya Bagchi, who searches for her lost husband in a city unknown to her with the help of a policeman. In the end it turns out that she has been using everyone to get to a terrorist and all the male characters merely become the puppets of her plan. The centre point of the film is at the scene of the Durga Puja which comes towards the climax of the story. At this point, the woman in the form of a goddess brings the climax to the entire thrilling drama. In a way, the filmmaker compared Vidya Bagchi to the Indian goddess, and perhaps even suggested that through Vidya's character, the goddess *Durga* destroyed an evil spirit.

Indian cinema is growing with new stories and stronger women characters to justify the changing position of women in the society. The women characters in the present cinema are aware of their own identity as women as well as with the problems of the changing world. Thus, the focus of the present paper is on the portrayal of women characters in Hindi cinema who though bound in the clutches of the patriarchal society, are successful in creating an identity of their own despite the opposition from the males around them. The movies discussed here, reveal feminist overtones with women characters overpowering the male characters and their destinies as well. The woman-centred narratives in these movies succeeds in subverting the myths of patriarchy and male power and establishes a world which is home to both men and women who are equally strong, self-willed and sharp-witted.

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