



TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF WOMANHOOD INTO SELFHOOD IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY FILMS

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ABSTRACT

Film, the most popular media, has a tremendous impact to carve out how individual can feel about a particular topic. Indian films portrayed women characters as doubly marginalized creatures. In earlier times women were featured as a commodity only to satisfy male urge and their bodies were featured in a way as if they are meant for male consumption with some few exceptions. Now changes occur and women begin to play the role of central characters. The audiences also begin to perceive the makeover from the conventional girl to an iconoclastic woman. The present study focuses on three movies 'Queen' (Hindi), 'How Old Are You?' (Malayalam), and 'Rani Padmini' (Malayalam) with giving due emphasis on how the women characters are transformed or how they are emancipated in this patriarchal world. Three films mentioned here are highly inspirational and motivational story of women's empowerment.

Keywords- commodity, iconoclastic woman, emancipation, empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Film and social reality do feed one another. Film has a tremendous impact to carve out how individual can feel about a particular topic. Indian films portray women characters as stereotypes. It is a double emphasized statement that women are often subjugated in every field and they are doubly marginalized. Films, the recently flourished scenario, also emphasize the same. In the olden days women have been relegated to the passive position in film after film. She merely becomes an adjunct to the man, the wielder of power. At that time, women were featured as a commodity only to satisfy male urge and their bodies were featured in a way as if they are meant for male consumption with some few exceptions.

It is a truth that as years pass, everything gets transformed. It happened in the case of film also. In the earlier films, heroes enjoyed dominant roles and women characters were sidelined. Media at that time were packed with gender stereotypes. Now changes occur and



women begin to play the role of central characters. Currently women are representing themselves in a very bold way and they are no longer portrayed as innocent, quiet, secondary ones but as bold, brazen and provocative women. From this, it is evident that films began to show libertarian feminism. Now changes occur and women begin to play the role of central characters. What happens here is the reversal of seemingly solid categorization of tradition ratified gender roles. The audiences also begin to perceive the makeover from the conventional girl to an iconoclastic woman.

Liberal Feminists argue against the information that society tends to have the false belief that women, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men. According to Liberal Feminism, each woman is an individual and each has the right and ability to fight for her own equal rights via her own actions and choices. They go all-out for sexual equality through political and legal reform. They conceive of freedom as personal autonomy. Liberal feminists believe in a basic principle of 'living a life of one's own choice'.

The present study focuses on three movies 'Queen' (Hindi), 'How Old Are You?' (Malayalam), and 'Rani Padmini' (Malayalam) with giving due emphasis on how the women characters are transformed or how they are emancipated in this patriarchal world. The characters in these films are played out by renowned actresses like Kankana Ranaut as Rani in the film 'Queen', Manju Warriar as Nirupama in the film 'How Old Are You?' and Manju Warriar and Reema Kallingal as Padmini and Rani respectively in the film 'Rani Padmini'. It is undoubtful that these well known actresses have kept their genuinty towards their roles. The directors of these movies are really successful in asserting their female heroines' uniqueness. Though they are heroines in limelight, they can be seen everywhere among us. They contain the energy, fun, pangs and pains of every typical Indian woman.

The movie *How old are you?* takes us along with a woman's quest to unearth her long buried identity. The movie 'Rani Padmini' depicts the portrayal of journey towards passionate awakening of two women from different backgrounds with a blend of feminism. The movie Queen tells us the story of a jilted bride who decides to go on her European honeymoon anyway by herself and ends up embarking on a journey of self discovery. Altogether these movies make feminist statements, talk about women's individuality and also show us women's upliftment in different ways. These movies show the central female character as the backbone of the entire theme. They at once become the sign of promise and prominence for their family.

There is a common belief that women do not have a singular identity. Their existence as an entity is always associated with a male figure as it was said in *Manusmriti* that the father should look after in Kaumara-hood (before marriage), husband should protect in youth, sons should guard in old-age and thus, the women do not deserve independence. In short no way



woman is allowed to assert her identity. But nowadays this quote goes into oblivion. Times have changed and with their ever-increasing role in the fields of education and employment, women have acquired new liberties. Women who felt restricted to the male oriented culture have now gained new strengths and new voices. Women who always positioned in the margins from generations, have now gained an individual voice to present their sufferings before the world.

Film, as media, plays a major role in establishing feminine identity in this male dominated society. Films not only uncover women's predicaments before us, but also their urge to live a better and self sufficient life. Women have now started working outside even without their men, which is indeed a revolutionary step forward by the Indian women. It is through films and other medias that they receive sufficient inspiration and exposure. On these days, women do not want to be 'powerless', 'exploited' and 'sexually harassed.' They recognized silence is no longer golden for them and so resistance comes very naturally to them. Although their forms of resistance may be different from one another but the intention is same, to voice against the wrong or injustice done to them. Their act of resistance has helped them to build their potential and make the most of them in the right way. Now they have the courage to fight against the wrong or injustice done to them, so they talk louder for their rights, demanding equality and self-respect.

There are many instances in the concerned films which support the ideology of liberal feminism. The female characters in these films are actually not demanding domination but equality and dignity. Each of the characters steps out of their homes to express their own mode of resistance. They all have resisted the shield of protection, fear and insecurity that have long been imposed upon them by society. Each woman mentioned in these films has a different story to tell. In the film *Queen*, Rani completely resists the support or dependency from the man who once rejected her. Rani sets out her journey alone to enjoy the honeymoon and learns variety of experiences. There is a thought that woman is just a commodity to be possessed and used at the man's will and pleasure. She overturns the notion.

In the first part of the film, the central character is presented as very weak who is not able to acclimatize with the breakup of her relation that would have ended in marriage. One can easily identify the timidity in her from the following instance: when her would-be announces about his unwillingness, she tries her best to pacify him by saying different matters like family status, parents' condition to which he never pays any concern. Her transformation begins at that very instance when she realizes that a man could never understand her even if they have been in love for a while. She retaliates him for his rejection by rejecting him by giving his engagement ring back at his house in front of his mother.



From the first heartbreak itself she realizes how a woman should be and have to be. Though the rejection shatters her completely, she becomes a phoenix bird and raises her voice by saying that she wants to enjoy her honeymoon by going abroad with an intention of defeating the male ego. That flight shows her entry to a new daring world. Rani who is timorous at the beginning transformed into an intrepid and determined lady when she meets the ultra modern woman named Vijayalakshmi. Thereafter she recollects the moments in which she gets humiliated by her would-be. During her expedition she has to reside with some male members in a single room. Though she hesitates first she shows the guts to be bold enough to accommodate them also. A lot of incidents happen in her life which makes her more strong and audacious. She learns to earn an income for the well being of her own existence which marks self efficiency and independency of that character. In the film the repeating gesture that she shows is the spreading of her hands which symbolizes the earnest desire for freedom. Thus she attains selfhood of her own.

Finally her would-be got stunned by seeing the changes that happened to her and he goes after her making the proposal again and again. Though she pretends to be ready for accepting him she never accepts him. After her trip from the world of enjoyment and recognition, she meets him at his home and happily announces her unwillingness to marry him. He is really struck at the news. Thus she takes her sweet revenge by simply destroying all his dreams and hopes. Here she really becomes a synonym for the title *Queen*- the rarest gem.

The film *Rani Padmini* which starts with the song of 'let's fly together to the heights' in a way echoes the inner psyche of every woman. The film introduces two brave girls Rani and Padmini. Padmini, who belongs to typical rural area, gets married to an urban man and thereby forced to be uprooted from her family. In her husband's house she never receives a warm welcome and she has to pass through lot of struggles. Her mother in law never allows any freedom to her and tries to dominate her every time. Her husband is always away from home in spirit of adventurous car journey which alienated and tormented her very much. At a very crucial moment she receives divorce petition through her mother in law. To prove that woman is not a puppet in the hands of men, she decides to go in search of him by boldly taking away some money from the family. Her strong determination helps her to reach her destination.

Rani on the other hand is a very courageous girl presented with a boyish outlook from the very beginning till the end. It is she who supports her family. When she is confronted with a rogue she fearlessly opposes him. But to ensure the safety of her own and family members, she tries to get rid of that situation and she flees to another place. The two women meet in a bus journey. There Rani provides the support to Padmini to take vengeance on that man who tries to molest her. From then onwards they joined their hands together and decide to be fighters in life. They share their stories each other. Both of them never try to consider their



feminine identity as a curse instead they strive to glorify their incarnation as women. At one moment Padmini comments that girls are superb creation by citing the story of lady character Narayani, the epitome of beauty and courage. She advises her to spread their wings and fly to the world of liberty starts with the statement of a dream and ends with the fulfillment of that dream. Both Padmini and Rani get inspired by each other's perception about life. Padmini solves the issues in Rani's life and thereby becomes her saviour and like that it is through Rani that Padmini's husband realizes the value of Padmini. Usually in every film men are portrayed as saviours. But in this film when men become helpless women adopts the role of saviours.

The story of the film *How Old Are You* is centered on a 36 year old character named Nirupama who works as a U.D clerk in the revenue department. She is an emblematic housewife who represents the silent pains of millions of hapless mothers and wives which get conveniently ignored in their households. She has devoted herself to looking after her husband and her child and finds herself in a vacuum when they do not need her any more. She is supposed to lead a very normal life but every time craves for a change. Her passiveness denies all her hopes and dreams which help her to be settled in Ireland. On the basis of a question from her child, Nirupama has to undergo a meeting with the president which results in a complete failure. After that she becomes a laughing stock in front of everyone through social media. Then Susan her friend arrives there like an angel and reminds her of the woman she used to be and inspires her to rediscover her younger self.

Susan's presence inspired her and she has begun to take every effort to become younger and smarter. She engages herself in sharpening the leadership quality which helped her to be more famous among the public. With the help of Susan and her strict motivation Nirupama has successfully conducted a seminar with important people as audience. Her topic of bio-farming has influenced all the officials and gives her the job of making it a reality. Thus president meets her again. The transformation of her character from dejected woman to a steady and sprightly lady is really praiseworthy and a great lesson to all female members in the society. A lady discovers her lost charisma overcoming strong odds from a patriarchal society provides great inspiration to the upcoming generation. Here one can witness the resurrection of middle aged heroine Nirupama who later claims for gender equality. She defeats gender domination by conquering her husband's domineering attitude and forced him to confess the truth that he himself cannot manage life without her. Here he, the representative of entire manhood, admits the value of a woman. This film ended up as a voice of woman power, forgotten to love and live for herself.

Female friendship forms a major background support for the central characters to form their strong identity. Women's common experience of subjugation urges them to form bonds in order to fight back the impact of gender domination. Female friendship can possibly function



as a protection where they can find soothe and safety and repair the wounds resulting from oppression and tortures. The curative powers of female bonding allow women to overcome chauvinism and stay alive to enjoy female empowerment and to extend female friendship into female solidarity. In the above mentioned films also one can make out the greatness of female relationships which forms the crux of these films: the relation between Rani and Padmini in *Rani Padmini*, Rani and Vijayalakshmi in *Queen*, Nirupama and Susan in *How Old Are You?*. Their friendships characterize the exact nature of female companionship in the sense that they take great effort to develop and cultivate a sisterhood that allows them to care for one another as well as give and offer moral and material support. Each helps the other in hard times and encourages her to make positive changes that permit her to face the challenges. Thus friendship is a relationship between women rooted in giving and receiving moral support sharing stories and experiences, compassionate and encouraging each other. This form of association may occur between any women and does not necessarily involve sibling or mother- daughter relations. Women friends endow with each other reliability that goes beyond the concern for self and aims at reaching out to sisters in an attempt to aid and encourage them. This bonding allows them to battle against the force of patriarchal cruelty and helps them cure their common wounds.

Every heroine in this film discards any form of obstruction to their freedom and does not take into consideration any honest judgment on her after they find their true identity with the help of their female companions. Vijayalakshmi, Susan, Padmini are really forceful and vehement feminists. Men and women are equally rational. They are both therefore competent to perform social and practical roles at any level. Here the heroines struggle to define and attain an autonomous selfhood. Women become conscious of the need to define themselves, their place in society and in their surroundings. All of them are equally enthusiastic to defy rebelliously against the well entrenched patriarchal social system and eager to find their own way. These characters shatter all shackles of customs and traditions that tie them with their misfortunes. These female characters are modern, strong and take bold decisions to survive in society. Rani, Nirupama, Rani and Padmini at one stage show their readiness to break their dependence on others especially their male members. They also prove that the silent spells of women should have been thrown away and their voices should be heard everywhere. They proved how a female can win in the male dominated society.

These films show the struggle of women for equality, an effort to make women become like men. They teach their male heroes to respect them. They show equality through their own actions and choices. The quest for identity is the corner stone of feminist movement and it has emerged. We live in age of women empowerment. Three films mentioned here are highly inspirational and motivational story of women's empowerment.



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