The changing perceptions of gender and sexuality in Indian visual narratives : a case study of Queen and Piku

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Abstract

To put it simply, gender representations have been a central theme in the Indian cinema, with particularistic portrayals of the roles of women. These visual narratives have a very wide audience and thus, the messages they put across ultimately ends up socialising an entire nation of people. Cinema is like religion in India. Hence, when ideas proliferate by the medium of the same, it can be potentially dangerous if it moulds the mindsets of the masses towards prejudiced conceptions. Women for long have been stereotyped in the Indian cinema.

However, there have been drastic alterations in the portrayal of the women in the Indian visual discourses in the very recent past. These changes in the life and orientations of the subaltern have mainly been incorporated in terms of their independence, financially and apart from the men. A part of these interpretations in the new trend of Cinema also represents a sexual revolution for the Indian women folk, who have finally come out to talk explicitly about their sexuality. These changes have come about with the orientation and reorganization of the entire world as one cosmopolitan space. With the processes of globalization, communications revolution and privatization on the go, society and societal perceptions about women have undergone transformations.

This paper will try to analyse how the Indian women have come to be portrayed as independent individuals in the Indian cinema. Their identity has now been begun to be carved out as singular individuals who do not need a man's name and identity to survive and sustain in society. This opening up of the Indian women, and the deconstruction and reconstruction of their images in the Indian visual narratives, thus presents a very intriguing theme for social research. The changing cinematic gender representations are highly symbolic because they ultimately are a reflection of the actual Indian society.

Keywords: Gender, sexuality, Indian, visual narratives, cinema.

1. Introduction

The media has largely been a masculinist arena. With men principally holding the reins of the business, the women have often been misunderstood, misrepresented and of course underrepresented in the media houses and on celluloid.

Early analyses found the media to be deeply implicated in the patterns of discrimination operating against women in society – patterns which, through the absence, trivialization or condemnation of women in media content amounted to their "symbolic annihilation" (Tuchman, 1978). That general critique quickly came to be positioned around two central axes: an analysis of the structures of power in which women are systematically subordinated; and a focus on the politics of representation and the production of knowledge in which women are objects rather than active subjects. These two concerns were addressed in many studies of the late 1970s and early 1980s as problems of "women in the profession" and "images

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of women in the media." But they have gradually come together to produce a complex analysis of the structure and process of representation, the cultural and economic formations that support these, the social relations that produce gendered discourse, and the nature of gendered identity.

Shifting our focus particularly to the Indian media representations, we find the Indian Cinema to be a popular trend and a medium of socialization of the Indian masses. Any historical analysis will reveal that the movies of the earlier period in the Indian film industry had been set on certain drifts, which may have been the result of – an urge to sustain the 'traditionality of the Indian society', to maintain the sexual status quo, or may be due to a fear to introduce different or radical trends in a medium so popular with the masses. A discernible influence of patriarchy was evident in the movies of the 1990s; with the family being portrayed largely as a joint family with a patriarch at the head of it, who exercises stringent control over the other members, and especially keeps the women under 'control'. In certain cases the patriarch was so strict that the other family members would be terrorized with his sheer presence in the house.

Most of the 90s films had strong figures of authority, usually a father, grandfather or uncle. Such figures may be seen as embodiments of the Hindu Right's belief in the notion of centralized governance. Such movies are not uncommon even now, for that matter, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam*, and in the recent past, *Dilwale Dulhaniya Lejayenge*, are very good examples in this context. We however, cannot refute the fact that there were movies which did not conform to the larger trend and have been women centric or have portrayed images of strong women. *Mother India (1957), Sita Aur Gita, (1972),* have projected images not atypically identified with the cinematised perceptions of women in India.

Thus, though there exists a body of feminist film making in Hindi cinema, the leading lady of Hindi films has more or less played defined roles which conform to the values upheld by Indian society. Women in Bollywood have been uni-dimensional characters, who are good or bad, white or black. There are no shades of grey. This dichotomy was reinforced in popular films which distinguished between the heroine and the vamp, the wife and the other woman. Films have also been inspired to a large extent from religion and mythology whereby women characters were seen as the epitome of virtue and values, those who could do no wrong. The image of women as Sita has been repeatedly evoked in many films after independence. Through the ideas of loyalty and obedience to the husband, Hindi cinema successfully institutionalized patriarchal values. Films like*, Dahej* (1950), *Gauri* (1968), *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.

2.   Sexual representations and Indian cinema

What has been largely missing from the premises of Indian visual narratives is the sexual liberation of women. In general a woman's sexual desires have never been encouraged and mostly portrayed in covert fashion, whenever they have been portrayed for that matter.

Sex is normatively considered a taboo subject and is rarely discussed in society. For example, older Hindi films portray sexual desires- elliptically, alluding to sex in an indirect fashion. Even if such instances were shown in, they were tagged as unacceptable and morally degrading. A child out of wedlock, illicit sexual relations or the mere fulfilment of sexual desires of the women were never acceptable themes in the Indian cinema. But there were a few movies which did highlight these issues, two of them would be, *Astitva* (2000), and *Kya Kehna* (2000); these two movies for the very first time broke the stereotypes and highlighted issues which are considered as radical in the Indian society at large. However again a critical dimension was visible, in *Astitva*, Tabu, a married woman, is portrayed as having illicit relations with her music teacher and also has a son from it; in the second movie, Preity Zinta, a college student, is impregnated by her boy friend, and decides to keep the baby irrespective of social ostracism. (it is to be noted that *Kya Kehna* was an adaptation of a Hollywood movie) So, both these movies did bring to the forefront the case of women, but it was portrayed initially as unacceptable, which gradually and eventually comes to be accepted by society. Also, the second movie was more like an anti-abortion campaign rather than being exclusively women-centric.

Thus, sexual desires of the women were never projected as a natural and biological need for them, or as a part of their being. Like society in general, in the visual narratives also the libido of men have been highlighted with the women just playing responsive to their sexual advances. The images of women to a certain extent have been 'one-tracked' and largely 'androgenised'. Shakuntala Banaji, in her work also

supports this claim, when she states that, researchers doing textual analysis of Hindi films (Chatterji 1998; Kazmi 1998; Mathur (2002); Nair 2002; Vishwanath (2002) have argued that the films support unjust, patriarchal regimes. She further states that, in this context, increased sexual "permissiveness" on the screen is seen as simply one more complicating factor in the chain of iconography which binds and degrades women. In this view, it fuses the traditional Hindi film dichotomies of "vamp/prostitute/dancing girl" and "chaste wife" within individual heroines and makes the idea of "woman" merely more appealing to certain men. Meanwhile, heroines become less psychologically coherent. Male viewers would, apparently, previously have had to cheer for dancing girls and then to fall silent in respect for the loyal piety of the heroine.

3.   The case of *Piku*

Piku, is the story of a young unmarried girl, played by *Deepika Padukone*, who is independent, and lives with her aging father. She however is strong headed and tough and she knows what she wants. A noteworthy feature of this film would be that there is no specific deliberate portrayal of any love interest for *Piku* in the movie. The points which make this film a case in point are –

● *Piku* , the protagonist played by *Deepika*, has an active sex life in the movie, though she does not have a partner.(Boyfriend or husband)

● Her father is well aware about her active sex life, and the fact that she is not virgin and has no hassles about it.

● Her father does not encourage her to get married but rather to focus on bigger things in life; in brief he does not think that a man is a necessary part of a woman's life.

Such a backdrop, where the guardian of the female lead, is okay with the overt sexual activities of his daughter and does not treat it as unacceptable and obnoxious, but rather accepts it as a natural biological need of his daughter is the most outstanding trait of this movie.

Piku 's father, played by Amitabh Bachan, is an upper class Bengali gentleman, and thus the movie, reflects the educated and liberal approaches of the enlightened Bengali masses of Kolkata. The setting of the film is also crucial. West Bengal had a lasting impact of colonisation and Western education under the British rule. The '*Bengali Babus*', came to be incorporated as an inherent part of the British

administration in the later phases of colonial rule. The setting of the film is crucial because we cannot imagine such a movie being filmed in the backdrop of a state like Haryana , or Uttar Pradesh for that matter because they harbour conservative attitudes and lifestyles especially in relation to the women.

The portrayal of *Deepika*, as a financially and sexually independent woman, who is not tied down by ideas like marriage and family is a crucial element of this new trend of cinema.

The unequivocal sexual life of *Deepika*, is a trend which Feminists like Eve Ensler talk about. Women have for long been passive and clandestine about their sexuality and erotic desires. But the point is that, there is actually no need to do so, as like men, women are human and thus, the need for sex is not unnatural, in either case. What however needs to be done away with is the disguising of the female desires. Ensler has asserted the case of female sexuality repeatedly. She in her work 'Vagina Monologues', (1998, ed. 2008) has talked about the entrenchment of sexuality in a number of cultures throughout the world. How, people, especially the women, are even intimidated to use words like 'vagina' and the inhibited approach to female eroticism, Ensler makes clear, is almost an inherent part of most cultures of the world.

Journalist Daniel Bergner's book *'What Women Want: Adventures in the Science of Female Desire'* , is one work which substantiates on this issue. Basically and essentially what has happened is that in stereotyped projections of women as 'mothers', 'daughters', 'wives' or 'grandmothers'; their portrayals as sexual beings has been sidelined and has become a lost theme. Since men are always seen as initiators, the women correspondingly come to be branded as merely responsive, without native urges of their own.

4. The case of *Queen*

In this movie, *Kangana Ranaut*, plays the role of *Rani* (or Queen), who is a domestic and submissive, girl, who is left at the altar by her fiancé. At first she is devastated and cannot come to terms with herself. But later she gathers herself, takes heart and sets out to go on her 'pre-planned honeymoon' all on her own. And it was this trip, which ultimately changes her perceptions on life, companionship, independence and deconstructs her previous notions on happiness which were intrinsically related to love and marriage. This trip does her good, as she find a bunch of friends, three friends from three different countries, all of them

boys, whose companionship gives her life, a new happiness and transforms her pre-conceptualised ideas.

At a later stage, her ex-fiancé, tries to woo her back, and is impressed by her changed avatar and wants to take the plunge with her. The ground-breaking point in this film is when, *Rani* , holds no grudge against him, but rather on returning to India, after the trip she goes to his house and returns the engagement ring, gives him a hug and says a 'thank you'. The 'thank you' ultimately was for abandoning her at the altar, because as it was implied in ultimate analysis that if he would not have dumped her at that crucial point, she would have never taken that journey and would have thus, never experienced a new meaning of life.

When she returns from that trip, *Rani* is a changed person and the film ends with her walking out of her ex-fiancé's house, smiling and extremely elated.

Thus this movie has again, enhanced the singular potential of the female by projecting her as sufficient for herself, in herself, not in need of someone' else's identity or name. This is in a way similar to the idea of Radical Feminists who argue that, women need not be necessarily associated with men.

In the context of this movie also the setting has played a crucial role. The movie is set in Delhi, a typical north Indian situation; in such a context, the liberation of *Rani* , the protagonist, from the shackles of the society and convention is essentially symbolic. Her walking away from her fiancé, at the end of the movie is a symbolic portrayal of her emancipation from societal bonds like marriage and conventional ideas like a 'necessary companionship' which are imbibed in the minds of the Indian girls and women from a very early age.

In India, for the Indian women, marriage is a very important part of their lives. If a girl is not married by a certain age, she faces awkward questions and situations questioning her spinster state. The very idea of a single, unmarried woman, (career oriented or not is secondary) does not find conventional acceptance and place (without questioning and criticism) in the Indian society.

Yes, of course, there are women who have cut across these barriers and live independently or in live-in situations with their partners; but what has to be taken into account for these women is that, they are largely the educated and enlightened lot, who belong to the relatively progressive section of society.

In the given movie, *Rani* , is an average Indian middle class family girl, who plays by the rules of society. Rebellious traits and unconventional thoughts are not a part of her being. Nor is she very educated, who thinks on feminist lines. For such a girl , the kind of emancipation shown is highly vital for that component of society, for whom, such liberation from conventional bonds is still a distant dream.

5.   Conclusion

Indian cinema has undergone changes in themes with time. Also, there have been movies which have portrayed women in an alternative light. But visual narratives with specific themes of gender and specifically sexuality have been comparatively very less.

However, with the coming in of globalization and liberalization and the establishing of the world as 'one space', has brought about many changes at many levels, one of them being film-making.

Hence, the images of women on film are undergoing drastic alterations in the contemporary times. Another noteworthy element associated with this issue which needs to be highlighted is the acceptance by the Indian masses. Not only have the people accepted such ideas, but these two movies, taken in the study have been box office hits. This also implies the broadening of the minds of the Indian audience with time.

The basic point which was intended to be made was that, the representations of women on film in the contemporary times have essentially been centered on feminist lines; with the altering roles of women and their sexual orientations and desires being projected as explicit and natural, which was not a trend visible in earlier Indian cinema. This shift can be hailed as an achievement of the Indian media and the Indian society, as this trend will definitely compromise the entrenchment of the female and female sexuality in the coming years.

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