

Analysing the Subject plot and Characterisation of Women Oriented Bollywood Films: 2015-2019

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Abstract

The success of many Bollywood films has been dependent on the female characters of the individual films, which have seen their role develop from being just the eye candy for the audience to being the central character of the storyline. These genres of 'women-oriented' films made in every era of 100 years of the Indian film industry but their percentage has been less. The last decade from 2010 to 2020 also saw many such feministic oriented Bollywood films made on urban as well as rural issues about women. A few biopics on female sports stars, some on health issues faced by rural and urban women, some on women achievement stories at the national level and the list goes on for the experimental roles written exclusively for women actors in Bollywood.

Cinema wields a remarkable command on the public and shapes public view as compared to other mediums. Looking at this 'power-wielding' capability of the film as a medium one would question the accountability of the medium and also periodically assess the medium on various parameters like treatment of Indian women in films; actual or fictionalisation of female characters; addressing the issues of Indian urban as well as rural women and many more. This paper analyses the subject plots and characterisation of a few women-oriented films made in Bollywood between 2015 to 2019. The films chosen are of the unique subject plots they present.

Keywords: Bollywood Films; Women oriented Films; Characterisation; Subject Plots

Introduction

Cinema is a mirror of our society, and vice versa has been commonly talked about and accepted fact of society. Most of the filmmakers do believe that socially relevant cinema can bring about change in societal as well as individual attitudes. In the last 73 years of Indian cinema, we have seen the plots move from mythological to pre-independence to the middle class angry young man to romanticism to the parallel cinema to Hollywood remakes and the current cult of mixed genres. The success of many Bollywood films has been dependent on the female characters of the individual films, which have seen their role develop from being just the eye candy for the audience to being the central character of the storyline. These genres of 'women-oriented' films made in every era of 100 years of the Indian film industry but their percentage has been less. The last decade from 2010 to 2020 also saw many such feministic oriented Bollywood films made on urban as well as rural issues about women.

Before referring to the various roles and issues written for women-centric film, let us first get to know the relevance of the Bollywood film industry in the current era. As per various researches and surveys, it estimated that more than four billion people in over a hundred countries watch Indian films in the current era. When compared to other film industries all over the world, the Indian film industry is the largest, producing between 1500-2000 films in more than 20 languages per year (Deloitte, 2016) and with more than 2,022 million tickets sold annually in India alone (Statista, 2019). In terms of revenue as per the Deloitte Research,2016 the Indian film industry has gross box office realisations of \$2.1 billion expected to grow at 11 per cent CAGR reaching \$3.7 billion by 2020 (Deloitte, 2016).

With such significant collections and revenues, it would be all the more interesting to know the various topics and settings on which women-centric Bollywood films made in India. Till the 1990s we have witnessed films which rode on the shoulders of larger than life male actors or heroes. A few women-centric films were being made on shoestring budgets and showcased the plight and atrocities against Indian women. However, in terms of substantial and exciting roles for Bollywood film actresses, the last ten years of Hindi cinema has been an impressive one (Changemakers: Twenty Women Transforming Bollywood Behind the Scenes, 2019).

A few biopics on female sports stars, some on health issues faced by rural and urban women, some on women achievement stories at the national level and the list goes on for the

experimental roles written exclusively for women actresses in Bollywood. This paper will briefly outline the status of third world women of India and elaborate on the issues she faces in the current era; a brief history of Bollywood industry and the women-oriented films made in the recent past; subsequent analysis of the subject plots and characterisation of twelve randomly chosen women-oriented films made in Bollywood between 2015 to 2019. The films chosen are of the unique subject plots they present.

Status of third world women of India and her issues

“Women are not born, but made”, and India is the best example to illustrate this statement of Simone de Beauvoir (Butler, 1986). In this third world era, it is appropriate in the present circumstances to compare the position and space. Indian women occupy today concerning the time when India had just gained independence. Pre-independence the Indian women had equally participated in the national movements. At the same time, post-independence prodded into the domestic household chores, cut to their re-emergence as an ace in all spheres of life today, women in our country have seen it all. Much has been discussed and deliberated on the issues faced by Indian women over the years about education, health, economic position, gender equality etc. Over the time many changes have taken place for the other gender like 48.5% of the overall population is represented by women, they are equally there in academics and employment (Government of India, 2011). From 5.4 million girls enrolled at the primary level in 1950-51 to 62.8 million girls in 2011. At the upper primary level, the enrolment increased from 0.5 million girls to 32.6 million girls (MHRD India; Dept. of School Education & Literacy, 2016). Many women-oriented government programs have helped in the increase in literacy rates to more than 65 per cent today (Government of India, 2011).

Though Indian women literacy rates have risen over the years, and they are entering the professional fields, the prevalence and practice of female infanticide, poor health conditions, and lack of access to higher education persist. The patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain' and marriage being her ultimate destiny has not changed much (PoRESP project, 2015).

As per the Indian, Constitution women have been granted equal rights in terms of freedom and opportunities, yet their condition is far from reality. They have been prodded in the domestic household chores and made to submit to the male-dominated patriarchal society of our country, thus reducing them to being second class citizens. Inequalities have been there in

academics, health, financial resources, political, social and cultural opportunities and no choice or a say in matters of marriage, career or life.

Due to the increase in literacy rates in India, there is a large population of women who got an opportunity to get educated and be professionally qualified and have proved their metal as doctors, surgeons, scientists, professors in the country. Yet realities such as 3,78,277 cases of crime against women (both under various sections of IPC¹ and SLL²) were reported in the country during the year 2018 as compared to 3,59,849 in the year 2017, thus showing an increase of 5.1% during the year 2018 (National Crime Records Bureau, MHA-GOI, 2019). Thus we see that patriarchal mindsets and gender discrimination are still tailgating the Indian women and making them vulnerable to poverty and related security issues.

Early days and Changing Women oriented Films and Society in Bollywood.

Hindi film industry or Bollywood, popularly called, is synonymous to Indian culture. The Bollywood film industry derived its name from the famous American film industry, Hollywood. Cinema is a massive part of a person's entertainment budget in India. Till 1937, Bollywood films were made in black and white averaging around 200 films per year. It was only in the 1950s with the advent of colour and sound in film making that the industry became commercially successful. Bollywood has always portrayed society as desired by its audience and addressed the social issues and problems from time to time.

Scopophilia, "pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object." (Mulvey 1975: 843) in cinema is gendered, split between the axis of activity and passivity. Cinema's narrative structure favours the male character. The male character portrayed as active, and the female character as passive. It is valid for the portrayal of women and men in traditional Hollywood cinema, as analysed by Mulvey. It is also true for the portrayal of women and men in Bollywood films over the years, as analysed by numerous Indian researchers in the theoretical framework.

Indian cinema is the largest and most popular medium of communication with the masses. Looking at this 'power-wielding' capability of the film as a medium one would question the accountability of the medium and also periodically assess the medium on various parameters like treatment of Indian women in films; actual or fictionalisation of female characters; addressing the issues of Indian urban as well as rural women and many more.

¹ Indian Penal Code (IPC)

² Special & Local Laws (SLL)

Hindi cinema has portrayed the changing faces, roles, and contribution etc of Indian women through the lead characters. From a shy and ordinary woman to the intelligent and dynamic personality, the films have given enough space to sketch the image of the woman. From Meena Kumari, Madhubala to Hema Malini, Rekha, Smita Patil, Shabana Azmi, Madhuri Dixit and Aishwarya Rai and others, Hindi films became louder in every sense- voice, articulation and delivery of dialogue, sexual aggressiveness and terms of character which has been taking part in the society. Directors like Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Madhur Bhandarkar, Vishal Bhardwaj, Anurag Basu, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Anurag Kashyap have been compassionate with a progressive approach to the portrayal of women in Bollywood movies (Madaan, 2017). It is also true that many filmmakers have used women as an object and made movies that can be called a package of sex and violence. However, many commercial and art movies have also focused on the following image of women. Through their leadership role, these movies have played a significant role in the field of women empowerment.

The theoretical framework for the study and analysis of Female Characters of a few Women Oriented Bollywood Films between 2015-2019

The study draws its inspiration from social thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Jurgen Habermas and considered to be the founding fathers of critical tradition theory (Adorno, 2002). The theory draws heavily from the post-modernism, postcolonial discourse and feminism. It focuses on various subjects like--power, privilege, and oppression—which is very relevant in terms of the dominant Indian patriarchal society and position of women in India.

The main aim of the thinkers of critical tradition theory is to study the traditional values in a society which are most of the time known to be 'taken-for-granted' and then to find ways of subverting them. Thus, the critical theory focuses on social, economic, political inequities and power structure in the society which favours such inequalities, and further argues that every activity and thought in such a society is dependent upon power relations that comprise the above focus areas (Aich, 2009). Littlejohn & Foss (2007) utilised critical tradition theory in the context of portrayal of the image of Indian women and revealed that the concept of womanhood in India influenced by the Eurocentric ideologies that perceived women as a commodity.

The critical tradition theory also helps in explaining how media maintain the power structure in a society. Based on this explanation, we will be using the critical tradition theory as a

theoretical framework of this research analysis. The main goal of this study is to explain how media; which is an authorised social institution fulfils the social, economic, and political functions of the society; and is responsible for the stereotypical portrayal of women. Whereas the Indian women, in reality, are more than just physical beauty; they have their desires, voice, intelligence, depth, complexities and struggles not portrayed in commercial cinema. Therefore in the current study, we are trying to analyse women-oriented films where the Indian women have been either avenger or have stood up for the violence against them -unlike the women in the commercial cinema.

Women oriented films have been made in every era of 100 years of the Indian film industry, but their percentage has been less. The last decade from 2010 to 2020 also saw many such feministic oriented Bollywood films made on urban as well as rural issues about women. A few biopics on female sports stars, some on health issues faced by rural and urban women, some on women achievement stories at the national level and the list goes on for the experimental roles written exclusively for women actors in Bollywood. Here we analyse and elaborate on twelve women-centric Bollywood films released between 2015 to 2019 (www.imdb.com).

Dum Laga Ke Haisha (2015)

It is accepting the fat female body as the new normal. The strongest point of Dum Laga Ke Haisha is its story and true to life characters. The film explores the relationship between husband and wife. The most striking feature of the film was casting an overweight actress as the lead character who apt adequately treated this as an opportune. The scriptwriter of the film has tactfully reconfigured fatness to basic definitions of beauty, sexuality and romance. Fatness here portrayed through a favourable treatment of desirability, liveliness, adventurous and fun-loving. The audience is also sensitised on the social and cultural practice of fat-shaming by strategically placing it in this unique storyline. Most of the films in the past have always worshipped and pitted for a slim and thin actress while this film helps to break the stereotype and pitches for a curvaceous figure instead. Thus we see that through the struggles of a significant female lead, the film can subvert the 'taken for granted' values of the society in typical Indian patriarchal setup. The media fulfils its social function of raising the voice of stereotypical middle-class rural women for acceptance based on interior beauty.

Masaan (2015)

The tearless and fearless lower-middle-class women. The depiction of two young female protagonists as secure, thinking women, who meet their challenges and hurdles in life dry-eyed, calmly, without any histrionics, dings gender stereotypes effectively.

An urban middle-class woman from a conservative family based in a small Indian town, states blandly that she kept her tryst in a hotel with her boyfriend “out of curiosity.” A stereotypical and ‘taken for granted’ value of Indian society and culture, is the belief that – marriage is a holy union and sex reserved for it. However, the film very loudly and vocally subverts this belief when one of the leading female lead admits on the screen that she wanted to go to bed with her friend not out of any mad love or lust for him, but out of sheer curiosity about the act. Further, her consistent refusal to wallow in self-pity after being overtaken by the gruesome tragedy is also very striking. The film also challenges the social convention of women not being able to take conscious decisions, about partners, lifestyle and relationships. The film media through this movie very aptly fulfils its social function of portraying a courageous woman who not only bears the consequences of her acts but also does not indulge in blaming the situation/circumstance/people, which is very contrasting to typical women portrayals.

The film’s other female lead, Shaalu a young student from an upper-caste family in a small Indian town, too subverts from the traditional social custom of same caste matches which are typical in the Indian society. She also exhibits spunk and alacrity to follow her heart and refuses to be bogged down by small-town conventions and is unfazed by her lover’s revelation of his caste and family occupation of burning corpses. Thus we see the film media here totally disregards the traditional portrayal of female leads as shy and lowly and very smartly manoeuvre’s the audience towards two bold and intelligent small-town girls.

NH10 (2015)

Woman transgressing social norms of traditional female behaviour through violence with the purpose of exacting revenge. This movie is a brave take on honour killing; here, the female lead is no longer required to bow down to the orders of the panchayat or community leader for her love life affairs. The film very boldly transgresses from a typical Indian rural set up where the women characters portrayed as sagging women who can be bound to the home and made to

follow the patriarchal dictate. In NH10, the female protagonist breaks all the orders of the Khap³ and is courageous enough to take her revenge. There are four critical female characters in the movie, and all four women present almost all the issues related to women subjugation and their empowerment in India. While three of these women portray the typical silent sufferer and see the society from the very patriarchal perspective of Khap rule, it is the lead protagonist, who breaks the stereotype of victim and dependent. She fights back and asserts her power and individuality and finally emerges as a powerful individual. Through this film, the media very subtly puts across the message of women empowerment and her stand against the violence subjected to her in the name of family honour.

Piku (2015)

A female character was having liberatory traits and dealing with tabooed topics like sex, ancestral property and 'potty'. Moving away from a typical father-daughter relation in Indian society; where the father struggles all his life to fulfil his most significant responsibility of getting his daughter married to a competent man; this film talks about a father-daughter duo who openly talk about sex, relations and her rights to ancestral property. The film aptly subverts to the most radical urban Indian father, one who proudly introduces his daughter as 'financially, emotionally and sexually independent' and discourages any prospective suitor. The 'taken for granted' image of Indian women, who are always seen as inferior to men and raised with expectations – boundaries, is sagaciously changed here through the character of Piku, a sexually active urban woman who is not committed to any serious relationship and no one judges her for that – not even her father. She is also very vocal in initiating discussions about the ancestral property, which is inconsequential in a society where such decisions and discussions considered to be male authoritative. The media here very sagaciously puts forth the social message of desires and complexities of urban educated middle class working women who have their share of struggles to face in this judgmental society.

Neerja (2016)

A simple young air hostess and model who emerges as the bravest person in the face of terror, the film breaks all the stereotypes of a fashionista image of an urban educated women. In

³ A **Khap** is a community organisation representing a clan or a group of related clans. They are found mostly in northern India, particularly among the [[people of Western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, although historically the term has also been used among other communities. A **Khap Panchayat** is an assembly of Khap elders, and a **Sarv Khap** is an assembly of many Khap Panchayats

a typical Indian society, it is a universal acceptance that beauty and brains do not go together, and women can be brave only through the powers and blessings of the Indian female goddess. Inspired from a real-life story of an air hostess who died while saving the life of 300 passengers in an aircraft, the film very skillfully portrays a female lead who rises to an emergency and saves lives based on her training, skills and presence of mind. As a simple woman, she too has her share of personal problems to deal with, and which she solves herself, but that in no way should affect her professional work. The media here very aptly percolates the message of women bravery minus revenge, fights, divine and virile powers. It is all about a simple woman and her dedication towards her work.

Pink (2016)

The firm assertion from girls of Hinglish urban middle-class backgrounds, of metro cities or even small towns ", No means No". This film raises many bold questions to the society: "Are you virgin?" a question to be asked to both the sexes; should set time to return home for females apply to males as well? Moreover, does "Ladkee Hansee to Phanse" jibe mean that the girl is loose and freely available? The film powerfully portrays the precarious position of women in the rapidly changing urban Indian landscape, through its three female protagonists: Meenal, a determined woman not ready to back out and always ready to take up challenges; Falak as the most collective of all, who brought in the importance of consent even in a sex worker's life; Andrea who impacts the shallow mindset of the society which thinks that women from North-East are "easy targets". The film touches on the dichotomous definitions and duality in societal expectations of desirable conduct, especially from women. The media very aptly permeates the message of urban working women who abhor and can stand up if required against the intruding attitude of societal men towards women and issues of habitation for working women in urban areas.

Naam Shabana (2017)

Women can acquire importance in society only if they engage in nation-building acts. The lead woman protagonist marginalised twice in the film — first as belonging to a minority religious community and then as a woman. Though she is ready to bear this dual burden, she first needs to face the society together with her family and nation duties. The women, in this case, is only a secondary character, for her to gain her freedom, she needs to prove her freedom to mean

something, and also to utilise it for a greater good. In a typical Indian society, the women cannot enjoy their freedom the way the men do; they need to fight for this freedom in their family and society as a whole. Thus the film very aptly subverts from the stereotypical characterisation of women whose bodies meant for the pleasure of men and who have no social standing and no social sanction in society. The audience here gets to see an urban educated minority community woman who defies the dictates of religion and society to attain her freedom.

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha (2017)

The dissenting woman who prefers to leave her husband and is unwilling to return until he builds a private toilet in the house. This original film based on actual life events of an educated rural woman's protest. The storyline through satire talks about abolition of open defecation in a rural area, improve female sanitation facilities and also supports the government campaign of 'Swachh Bharat'. The film reiterates the bizarre nature of treating rural Indian women worse than animals, depriving them of their fundamental right to sanitation (toilet). The husband standing up for his wife's right to sanitation is again another protocol subverted by the film in a typical patriarchal rural Indian set up. Thus we see here though the background of the story is in a typical rural Indian patriarchal society the message delivered is of the social rights of the woman for sanitation, treating them as humans and giving them the freedom from the travesty of open defecation. The film channels the unexplored woes of women in rural India and addresses a relevant social problem through a more personal one.

Hichki (2018)

How an individual, with disorders and disabilities, ultimately accepted her limitations and played a saviour to those living on the fringes of society. The film deals with an offbeat subject that depicted rarely and discussed in Indian society let alone popular cinema. Through the protagonist, who has Tourette syndrome, the film intelligently attempts to break stereotypes and debunks myths related to those living on the fringes of society. The film depicts how persons with disorders and disabilities are singled out and have to put up with stares and sniggers of society. Though the protagonist is mocked and bullied by throughout her journey of life she showed to be damn sure of her potential when she tells her interviewers, "*Meri speech me Tourettes hai, meri intellect me nahi*" (My speech is affected by Tourettes, not my intellect). The film media delivers the message of an educated disabled woman, of how she converts her

weakness to her strength and stands alone against the whole world and overcomes all challenges, to help her students realise their true potential—thus showing the society that a disabled woman can not only stand up for her rights but can also fight for the rights of the ones who are deprived and underprivileged.

Raazi (2018)

Women who are assigned masculine work are not required to accord to manly standards.

The film based on the true story of a Kashmiri Muslim spy, who wedded in a Pakistani (enemy country) family of high-ranking army officials by her Indian father. The stereotypical image of female spies in such thriller movies is more of a strong character, who remains detached from the female counterparts to take up such masculine work. The film breaks this image and portrays a female spy who is very much aware and open about her frail and feeble power. The media conveys the message of how a simple, faint and minority community woman too can obey her father's nationalist wish of saving her country and put her life at stake for the nation.

Saand Ki Aankh (2019)

A Film Questioning Gender Inequity and Women's Oppression in Rural North India.

A biopic film that traces the journey of two Jat women in their sixties, who are introduced to sharpshooting by fluke and take it up as a newly found passion. The story set in a rural north Indian village where patriarchy, chauvinism and discrimination are endemic in the feudal family. The film very aptly subverts the audience to how uneducated rural women from a conservative social order can fight structures of oppression and make a life beyond these. The two women characters try to envision a world where they move beyond this patriarchal social order.

Moreover, the film not only celebrates the individual success stories of these two women but also depicts the struggles, failures and anxieties that surround their lives. It is an inspiration for the audience to watch two rural Indian uneducated women in their sixties take up sharpshooting to fulfil not just their passion but also encourage their next generation of younger women to break free from the chains of suppression and patriarchy.

Khandaani Shafakhana (2019)

A female-driven sexual innuendo-filled lesson on erectile dysfunction. The problems of the marital bed or sex-related issues faced by men kept under wraps from the female gaze in typical Indian society. However, here in this movie, the protagonist herself runs a sex clinic to get her

family out of financial debt and faces the cold stares of society in doing so. Though set up in a typical small-town inhabited by orthodox people, the film very wittily communicates the dualities of a society wherein the female protagonist herself are the product of the society that does not talk about sex. However, she compelled to take up a profession involving sex problems. The film very aptly portrays the shaming and harassment involved in the medical practice of curing sex problems, and the psychological complexities the small-town protagonist had to face in the same.

Conclusion

The women-centric projections of protagonists in Bollywood plays an essential role in an Indian women's life as they serve as the new pair of eyeglasses through which women of our country will observe by society. Though these films are set up with typical traditional values of the Indian society yet they somehow subvert the 'taken for granted' images of Indian women by portraying them as more than just physical beauty; having desires, voice, intelligence, depth, complexities and power to face oppression. As per the critical tradition theory, the films above are exhibiting the power, privilege, and oppression of typical urban and rural Indian women but together with this. It also gives hope to the audience that through their inner will and intelligence, the same Indian women can come out victorious. Through these genres of films, we can challenge the power system in a society, abolish the oppression of women and raise a voice against the violence of Indian women. Besides, we see that film as a media aptly used to fill in the gap between theory and practice of using media to inspire and motivate the society to incorporate best practices for the betterment of the society. These projections and portrayals of women in cinema, in turn, would lead to multiple effects in the society and their progress. The number of women-centric films with strong female characters has seen a sharp rise in the last decade in Bollywood, and we hope that cinema and society will carry on this love affair of women-oriented films in future too.

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