Indian Cinema as a Contradictory yet Efficacious Tool for Empowering Women

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Abstract

Women in general spend their lives being always conscious of their surroundings. The way they walk, talk, smile, react, crack a joke everything is under continuous supervision. And their male counterparts enjoy the privilege of being the supervisors or even better judges of their moral standards. For ages women have been pulled and pushed into the backstage in the name of culture, tradition and values. Cinema has come a long way from depicting women as objects of admiration to women as self-reliant individuals equally responsible for the development of the house and the society. But there are still discernible barriers to achieving absolute women and men equality, and the most important of them is the mental setup that has been framed and reframed over centuries with men at the vantage point. Now a days, women- oriented cinema is breaking old records and setting up new benchmarks even for men- oriented films. It attracts a comparatively larger audience and satiates their appetite for content driven films. The present paper attempts to study cinema's contribution in developing a less patriarchal and more equal consciousness.

Keywords: Gender, women empowerment, stereotypes, male-female equality, male-female oriented cinema

Introduction

First of all, it is important to understand that gender is a socially construed concept and has nothing to do with the anatomy of male and female. For physical differences does not account for capabilities and capacities. Women in the kitchen and men in the office is the most commonplace image presented on the screen, discussed in media and subtly drawn in literature. And the reversal of the roles is not just unacceptable but considered to be a disgrace. The question that needs to be answered is who decides these roles? It is generally believed that the behaviour and conduct of people in public and private sphere is formulated and guided by the elites. So, gender becomes a socially and culturally fabricated concept with men in the mainstream. When British came to India, they were apprehensive of the proliferating unity of the residents. There was no hope of annihilation as long as Indians were united. So, they devised a plan and divided people on the basis of colour, caste, religion, ethnicity, linguistics etc. This 'divide and rule' policy proved to be successful and India became 'ghulaam' as they referred to it. Gender distinction is a specimen of the 'divide and rule' regime of the British. Dividing the two sexes and pitting them against one another, regarding male as the dominant sex and female as 'weaker sex 'or the 'other sex' (De Beauvoir 1949), helps sustain the elites in authority. Anatomical differences cannot be accounted for weak femininity or strong masculinity as defined by society. Feminine is regarded as weak, dependent, submissive, compassionate, nurturing and emotional. Whereas, masculine is regarded as strong, independent, rational, competitive and dominating. Society pressurises boys and girls

to live up to the accepted norms of femininity and masculinity. As Simone De Beauvoir states 'one is not born a woman, rather becomes one' implies that society dictates the rules to both the genders and expects them to behave accordingly. Any deviation from societal norms is regarded as rebellion. Social acceptance is a necessity for people to live a happy life and hence their forceful embracing of the stereotypes functioning behind the façade of customs and traditions. Right from birth both the genders are moulded differently. Where a girl is taught to manage household chores, a boy is taught to manage life outside house. Jamaica Kincaid, an Antiguan- American writer has written a very touching short story titled *Girl* describing how the character and behaviour of girls is shaped by the society. It is basically a monologue of a mother in which the mother dictates the rules a girl should follow. It can also be regarded as a list of do's and dont's for a girl. The mother tells the daughter to wash white clothes on Monday, colour clothes on Tuesday, to cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil, and she also teaches her ways to walk and behave in public. It can be said that the story is an apt definition of a socially acceptable girl- someone who cooks, cleans, sews, nurtures and walks and laughs in a particular way and so on.

"*on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming…*"(Kincaid 1978)

Kincaid very penetratingly portrays the intent of society that is so eagerly trying to tame the feminine and unable to do so tags her a '*slut'*. The word has been used thrice in the entire story to emphasize on the importance of following the instructions given by the mother failing which she would be titled as nothing but a slut. So, you either conform or you disgrace, there is no in between for a woman. This is how in the name of customs and traditions her freedom is curtailed and all her wishes suffocate under the burden of society's baseless norms. There are a lot of questions that need to be addressed. The present paper tends to study the entire pattern of gender discrimination, its consequences, present scenario of gender sensitization and also tries to answer the questions so raised. Why is it that a woman is considered as a burden when she herself bears the burden of the entire family? Why is she called weak and fragile when she has the strength to bear the pain of birth giving? Why is she tagged as timid when she has the strength to stand up against the entire world to save her loved ones? We are all aware with the story of Savitri and Satyawan and how she fought with Yama and forced him to return her husband's life. The feminine harbours immense strength, courage, will-power, emotion, determination and sacrificial intent to save her people. And still the feminine is regarded as weak and powerless. Since men are regarded as strong and powerful, they have to perform the so- called masculine chores as defined by the society such as earning for the family, guarding them against the evils of outside world, carrying heavy loads, doing all the outdoor tasks such as bill payment, banking, marketing etc. What if a man doesn't find himself capable enough of executing the designated tasks? He is taunted and made fun of and in fact called names such as 'woman' as if it's a shame to be a woman or that women are incapable of carrying out the tasks that have been insensibly and unreasonably assigned to men. Infact in most of the Indian films there is a recurring image of people throwing bangles at the man who could not fulfil his role as per the standards maintained by the society and

is taunted to hide either in his mother or wife's lap. So, not living up to the baseless societal norms of masculinity means to lose your rapport and place in the society. People look at you with pity and disgrace in their eyes. You are considered unfit for the society and become the most circulated joke of housewives, offices, playgrounds, cafes, etc. It's almost equivalent to losing one's identity and so a forceful adherence to traditionally formulated norms of behaviour. In modern period, government and various organisations are making efforts to understand the needs and requirements of both the genders. And by understanding, they also try to provide both the genders an equal platform of opportunities and equal right to participation. Many acts and policies have been made to manifest gender equality in the world. In fact, Gender Equality is the 5th goal in the list of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). But do these policies actually lead to the results they aim for. Gender discrimination is an evil which is widespread in the world and it's so deeply rooted in society that there is a need for intensive efforts to curb it. Effective implication of such policies is equally important as is their formulation. Inadequacy to implement is the largest setback in achieving the goal of gender sensitization.

Contradictions Inherent in Cinema

Cinema has an enlightening and pragmatic impact on the audience. It caters to the emotional and rational appetite of the viewers and results in transformed thoughts. Although individual differences play a decisive role in the reception of films, the overall mood is that of cognizance. Cinema is generally regarded as a source of entertainment and a profit making venture in modern day scenario. With the introduction of 100 billion clubs and the concept of hit or blockbusters has commercialized the art that is cinema. There are certain critics who regard cinema as nothing more than a source of entertainment. Khalid Mohamed in Times of India, *'Sunday Review'* in the January 8, 1984 edition stated-

> *"all that the films stand for is exotica, vulgarity and absurdity"*.

There are other Indian critics who accuse popular filmmakers of not having a 'serious approach to cinema'(Chidananda Das Gupta). But on the other side there are critics who consider cinema to have a pragmatic function steeped in reality. Films derive their content from happenings in the society and in turn bring about social changes (to some extent). They take up issues that run rampant in the world around us and try to phrase solutions to these issues. But whether it succeeds in bringing about desirable changes is still doubtful. The effect a film has depends upon the viewer's reception of it. Different people perceive it differently owing to their individual differences. And it is this variation in reception which makes cinema a contradictory form of art. Sometimes the viewer does not consider the intensity of the problem raised and the solutions required but finds the mere presentation of the problem on the screen amusing. Repeated representation of social themes/issues can have dual effects, either it results in solving the issue once and for all or ends up aggravating it for the worse. Earlier women were presented in films as a commodity to be transferred from one person to another, shifting the power from father to husband. She was dictated the norms of the family, the do's and don'ts of a wife and a daughter-in-law, and she accepted it all with resignation. Society looked down upon women as liabilities and they were suppressed in every possible way. Women have always been the one to be blamed for any untoward happening in the family. Unable to conceive, she is infertile, husband died an

early death, she is jinxed, someone tried to sexually assault her, she was dressed indecently, and the list goes on. Once married women always live in a state of in-betweenness, striving to create an individual identity, and a place she could call her own, a place from where she cannot be turned out by anyone be it husband or father. A lot of Bollywood movies have taken up themes such as male chauvinism, domestic violence, suppression of women by the men of the family and outside, their unheard cries for help etc. Women have always been helpless victims of society irrespective of their role as a daughter, mother, sister, friend, partner, colleague, neighbour, basically no woman of whatsoever class/caste/race is lucky enough to have never experienced the biases so commonly hurled on her community. But with the emerging new trends in cinema women have been depicted as having earned a comparatively respectable position for themselves in society which in turn is reflected in the real-life scenario as well. Men in the mainstream and women as side line characters was the most common image in the films of earlier time. From male centred films to female centred cinema has come a long way in contributing towards gender equality and sensitization. A lot of films are being made these days keeping female actors at the vantage point, telling their stories of struggle and success, from their perspective. Films in its initial stage depicted women as always at the mercy of their father or husband bearing mental, physical, sexual and verbal abuse all in the name of love and protection. But with passing time filmmakers realised that it was all a sham and people needed to see and hear the reality behind it. So, they dug deeper and discovered stories that would be an inspiration for the entire female community and an eye opener for the deaf patriarchal society.

Some of the greatest 21st century women oriented films that contributed in transforming the mental setup of the society include *Queen(2014), Pink(2016), Dangal(2016), Ki & Ka(2016)* and . Queen is the story of an otherwise conservative middle-class girl who after being abandoned by her fiancé set out alone on her pre-booked honeymoon trip. Rani's journey within and without gives a new perspective on female individuality and the redundance of a man in her life to realize her dreams. Next in the list is *Dangal,* story of a whimsical man Mahavir Singh Phogat, who fathered three daughters in hope of having a son who would attain his father's dream of bagging a gold medal in wrestling in Commonwealth Games. His utter faith that only his son could fulfil his dream and his hopelessness after his failure to father one points towards the age-old mental setup that women are not capable of anything outside the four walls of the house. Although when his daughters Geeta and Babita, indulge in a fight with one of the boys of the area it dawns upon him that the quality that he sought in a son for realization of his dream is actually harboured by his daughters and that irrespective of their gender they could be the ones to turn his dream into reality. And so, he started training them despite all the comments and frowning of the village people who considered it a disgrace. With her father's training, though his methods seem a bit harsh in the beginning but they are intended for a better cause, Geeta became the first Indian girl to ever win a Gold in the Commonwealth Games, thus spitting right in the face of the societal stereotypes intended to keep women in check lest their authority be challenged.

One of the most discussed, debated, criticised and appreciated film of 2016 was *Pink,* story of three independent young women sharing a flat. The film focuses on the importance of consent in an act of intimacy. Non consensual sex be it in marriage, relationships, and even prostitutes for

that matter is a criminal offence. Just because a girl accepted a man's dinner invitation or she indulges in a heartily conversation with him does not give him the right to assume that she is available for anything and everything. Also this film attacks the patriarchal intent of the society to tame the female, where a woman is stereotypically termed as a bad influence or an outcaste if she comes home late, wears revealing clothes, works late and indulges in frank conversations with her male counterparts, takes her own decisions, is financially independent and so on while there is no such handbook of appropriate behaviour for men. Minal, Falak and Andrea three young and independent women after accepting a dinner invitation from three men whom they recently met after a rock concert through a common friend find themselves in a state of utter shock and terror when their consent for dinner is taken otherwise and the men try to lay their hands on them. Three of them flee the scene, after Minal attacks Rajveer with a glass bottle in self-defence. Threats follow, as Rajveer belonged to a politically inclined family and the girls find it difficult to carry on with their everyday tasks. Instead of retaining normalcy their lives take a nasty turn when Minal is arrested for attacking Rajveer with the intention of murder. Their consent for dinner is interpreted by the boys as permission to indulge in intimate touches and even further. In fact there is a stereotypical refrain in Bollywood that goes like "*hasi to fasi",* meaning thereby that if a woman laughs while conversing with a man she is definitely into him and asking for something more than friendship, which is almost meaningless and non-sensical giving all sorts of wrong ideas to the male community about their counterparts.

As is customary the domain of women is limited to the four walls of the house whereas for men the entire world outside these four walls comes under their domain. It was in 2016, for the first time that the screen projected a reversal of roles with the woman going out of the house to earn whereas the men stayed home cooking, cleaning and accomplishing almost every task that is so mindlessly labelled as feminine. So, we have *Ki&Ka* (starring Kareena kappor and Arjun Kapoor). It is a story of an ambitious working woman and a man who wants to be a 'house-husband'. The moment we hear the term 'house-husband' we become judgmental and make assumptions about Kabir (Arjun Kapoor), that he is a negligent and indolent fellow who wants to cash on his wife's earnings. Why is it so difficult to accept that a man can actually stay at home and do all the household chores equally effectively as a woman is expected to and that the woman can go out and be the provider rather than always being on the receiving end.

Conclusion

From being the side line characters to acquiring the centre stage women have undertaken a long journey in not just cinema but in real life as well. Earlier women were not given access to education which resulted in their suppression and their silent acceptance of their own condition. But with the changing times women were allowed to get education, go out and work, be a support to the family rather than a burden (earlier regarded as burden). Women have actually taken a step ahead and proved to the world that they are not lesser than men be it any field. But still there are a few people who find it hard to digest the fact that women can actually compete and be equal to men. It's high time for those male chauvinists to shed their pride and embrace the other gender as their equal counterparts. A famous writer Suzanne O'Sullivan has written a book titled' It's All In Your Head", in which she talks about psychological illness. Gender inequality is a psychological illness

that can only be cured through repeated attempts of both the genders and more specifically women because they are the main victims of such people's psychology. The change will begin from within the self. Let us shed ourselves of all prejudices of male and female and lets be humans, equal and acceptable.

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