DEVI TO DIVA - A TRANSFORMATIONAL JOURNEY PORTRAYING WOMEN IN MAINSTREAM BOLLYWOOD

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Abstract

Bollywood is a major influence on Indian culture. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India .Hindi cinema has influenced the way in which people recognize various aspects of their own lives. Hindi cinema is largely been about stereotypes. The characters, situations and plots have been largely based on stereotypical ideologies. The audience reads the characters based on how they look, dress and talk. Over the years Indian cinema has portrayed women being ' The Satti Savitri, The Abla Nari ,The Sanskari ,The Wamp, to The Item Girls ,The Trophies ,The Bold beautiful and empathetic to The Ridiculed Modern women. "The paper begins with how bollywood is instrumental in shaping the culture and how it sketches womanhood. It also undertakes some glimpses from popular films to analyze the process of typecasting. A section is dedicated to the discussion on modern realistic women. In conclusion, a debate ensues on whether the mainstream cinema has been successful in portraying Indian women of different shades in a society dominated by patriarchal values.

Keywords: Bollywood, Culture, Modern India, Stereotype, Womanhood, Patriarchal values.

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation, performance and portrayal in media are the three important dimensions of study for the social science researchers of modern time, especially for the feminists. Because for the empowerment and development of the women section, it is very important to give them proper environment where they can raise their voices against the inequalities and the gender-gap they are experiencing in our male dominated or patriarchal societies.

Statement of the problem: Popular cinema and culture derive from each other. Films are believed to persuade the Indian masses as people rely on this medium to see the world out of their little widow .In a very explicit way, Bollywood has shaped the cultural, social and political values of people of this country. Mainstream cinema has been very significant in portraying women on celluloid.

THE BOLLYWOOD EFFECT

The Hindi movie industry based in Mumbai, popularly known as 'Bollywood', has influenced daily life and culture in India for decades now. In fact, movies are the foundation of entertainment and almost a religion in the nation. Women in India are not a homogenous group – they belong to different religions, castes, class, and socio-economic status and have different kinds of ambitions and desires as a result of which they lead different lives. And over the years, bollywood has tried to showcase women from all these groups making the reel scene seem more real like. The changing depiction of women in Indian Cinema from being labelled as weak and objectified to being shown as strong lead characters have been quite evident. Though there has been a considerable attempt to show the changing status of women in Bollywood in recent films like Piku (2015), Nil BateySannata (2016) and Anarkali of Arrah (2017) with leading female characters who are independent and move beyond the lines of gender stereotypes and patriarchal influences but the lack of complex narrative structure and the lucidity in the narrative techniques fail to make the desired critical impact.(Manzer,Arvind-2019)

THE DAYS OF YORE

Earlier, women were portrayed as meek, docile and vulnerable .She was an idealistic homemaker under her husband's shadow, she was clad in a sari or a salwar suit and would ideally been shown 'Sanskari'. The Bold characters would usually refer to "Vamps", the evil character.

How real are the women characters in Hindi films? Ethics, morals and principles are the blueprint on which these films are placed. Thus, women rather than being depicted as normal human beings are elevated to a higher position of being ideal who can commit no wrong. Their grievances, desires, ambitions, feelings, perspectives are completely missing from the scene. This in itself is a defiance of the stereotype.

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One of the first few films to showcase to changing dynamics of female character was "Mother India", it portrayed her inner strength. Slowly filmmakers started touching topics which were bold and had their voice of their own, this also witnessed changes in the society where women were determined to take stances.

In the 70s, every time a woman on screen pleaded "Bhagwaan ke liye mujhe chhod do" to a menacing villain with ignoble intent, the front stalls would mostly burst into whistles. The stock situation had become perverted titillation of sorts.

The phenomenon summed up the mindset of a segment of the audience who loved to see women subjugated on screen. Elsewhere, Meena Kumari's portrayal of sorrowful and melodramatic characters in several films earned her the sobriquet of Tragedy Queen.

The hero's sister, ironically, remained the perfect definition of 'Abla Naari'. The sister's rape enraged the heroes such as Amitabh Bachchan in Aakhree Rasta, Raj Babbar in Aaj Ki Awaz and Sunil Shetty in Aaghaz, unleashing violent blood feud.

The Indian audience has secretly fantasized the one and only ideal women - the traditional girl. In the films of the '60s and the '70s, she was often typified as a girl who would wake up early, sing bhajans, worship her husband and cook for the family. If she ever worked (which was rare; necessary only if she came from a very poor family), she would walk to office.

The era of '80s saw a spate of family films that had almost every heroine from Hema Malini and Rekha to Moushumi Chatterjee and Vidya Sinha try out the formula, either as bahu, bhabhi or single mother.

CHANGE IN THE SUBJECT MATTER

Many new media, including Films have started capturing the latest trends which are very close to the heart of the young audience. For example, The book Palace of Illusions revisits the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. The author explores her loneliness in her father's house, her friction with her mother-in-law Kunti and her seemingly inexplicable attraction towards Karna. Sumitra Nair, who works for a woman's magazine, says, "The book explores Mahabharata 16 from a woman's point of view. The book had a bit of history and mythology written in a contemporary style. The characters seemed more modern and, therefore, I could connect with them." Namita Gokhale's 'Shakuntala' , Ashwin Sanghi's 'Chanakya's Chant' or David Hair's 'Return of the Ramayana' series have all explored the ancient classics. The pace of the novels is fast and the language is simple and modern to engage the readers. Apart from books, Amar Chitra Katha comic book series and animated shows like Roll No. 21 on various mythological characters also entices children to learn more about Indian fantasy literature. (Oza,2012)

THE RENAISSANCE

In an era of information overload, it is not too radical to expect some social consciousness from the cinema medium. Popular rhetoric and culture need to be challenged and cinema can do it effectively if it exhibits some sensitivity to gender issues. This is because Hindi films now enjoy a huge international market in many South Asian and Western countries. Thereby, operating in a larger frame-work like this calls for a portrayal of women which is not only accurate but also just to the cause of women empowerment.

Although Indian films are trying to break stereotypes and opting for innovative characters, the process has largely been slow. Despite a spate of several prominent female-oriented films offering meaty roles to heroines and several promising women filmmakers creating offbeat cinema in recent times, our films have rarely got rid of stereotypes. Bollywood has a powerful role in shaping mindsets and behaviors in India. It is much more than just an entertainment industry. Movies have reflected the aspirations of many Indians for decades. Often, celebrities are respected in a manner similar to religious enthusiasm. As India continues to modernize and Westernize, Bollywood keeps up by showcasing "modern" relationships. Some mainstream movies now portray realities of the urban Indian youth: pre-marital sex, live-in relationships, and women and men who are relatively independent from familial obligations.

CHANGES THROUGH THE LENS

It is important to examine this issue as women are the large part of country's population and therefore their representation on screen is essential for determining the existing stereotypes in society. This paper will investigate about how mainstream Hindi cinema is restricted with limited defined sketches of womanhood. It will also examine about whether the mainstream Hindi Cinema has been successful in representing women's different shades through celluloid screen in a society with patriarchal values. (Gupta, Prakash-2021) When Mona Darling displayed her long legs or lit the villain's cigar, the audience celebrated the arrival of a decorated vamp on the screen. In the '60s and the '70s, a woman wearing sleeveless blouse and sipping alcohol on screen blatantly symbolized being bad. Nadira, playing the scheming temptress in many a film including Shree 420, was the prototypical vamp of the era.

The obnoxious golden wigs, dripping red lips, skimpy gowns with long slits and suggestive mannerism defined the vamp in the '70s and the '80s. Padma Khanna's Husn ke lakho rang or Helen's Mehbooba Mehbooba were songs that set the trend highlighting the stereotype.

A trademark that typified the vamp was she would get to do a cabaret dance. Since the 2000s, the cabaret dance has morphed into item numbers. While specialized dancers such as Rakhi Sawant and Kashmira Shah represented first generation item girls, the leading actresses of our times have taken over the job lately. Indian film no longer requires that the heroine and the vamp be two different characters. Indian actresses are now cast into lead roles where sexuality is a relevant, even unconcealed, part of their character.

CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

Contemporary cinema has attempted to explore taboo subjects like sexuality, infidelity, surrogacy, divorce, live-in relations etc through movies like Jism(2003), Astitva (2000), Salaam Namaste (2005) etc. For eg: Chak De India (2007) talks about the conflicts that women face when they decide to excel in the field chosen by them. In the movie's case the field is sports. The sportswomen in the movie are shown to negotiate these conflicts and not be morally upright by choosing family over career. They are not super-women; they are just normal beings who are able to decide their priorities. This portrayal is no mean achievement of Hindi cinema. Astitva (2000) has been pitched as a film which explores the unconventional, the desires of a married woman who has long been neglected by her husband. The film is a revelation in the sense that it makes a strong statement about the hypocrisy in the society. The film questions the realm of patriarchy which may not necessarily commit violence but manifest domination in other forms like denial of space and freedom and subjugation. The society needs to accept these forms as patriarchal domination and not just focus on violence. The protagonist Aditi (Tabu) emerges in the end as a strong woman with her own thoughts who rather than seeking forgiveness from her husband, chooses to walk out and live life on her own terms.

From the storyline to end credits -- most of the time their male counterparts get preference over them .Filmmakers occasionally come up with stories about women empowerment actresses like Tabu and Vidya Balan get a rare chance to carry them on their shoulders. But such opportunities are few and far between.made well, women-centric films can dig gold at the box office. "Kahaani" and "No One Killed Jessica" are cases in point Based on the life and struggles Mary Kom, India's Olympic medal-winning boxing champion, the film is a sneak peek at the life of a sportswoman fighting for her spot in the game. Priyanka Chopra played the role with panache and power.

CONCLUSION

From a damsel in distress to a figure of power, women have come a long way in Bollywood. With characters especially created keeping women in mind, these points to a new wave in Indian cinema, where women are being trusted to carry a film to box office success. This is a stark difference from the previous notion that the role of the protagonist was reserved only for a male character. Today, women in unconventional and dominant roles are appreciated and respected by audiences the world over.

Bollywood has traditionally portrayed the woman as timid, submissive and vulnerable. She was the perfect home maker, while bolder roles were mostly associated with antagonists with loose morals.

Many Hindi Films have taken it up to them to correct the collective wrong of the society by portraying the Dalit hero/ heroine in a larger than life portrayal. Glorification of one's self, and holding them higher than their counterparts, have always existed in the Indian society. These glorifications have also seeped into the films that are made. This „Holier-than-thou" mentality of one's caste in movies is symbolized by various aspects, such as display of power (both societal power and physical power), using symbolism of political leaders in the backgrounds, and associating with powerful animals, presenting shots which portray a larger than life image of the hero, usage of dialogues that stir audience at an emotional level etc.(Oza,2018)

Today however, an actress demands and commands equal space on the silver screen as that of her male counterpart. The notion that only a hero can deliver a super hit in Bollywood has drastically changed. Over the years there has been a drastic transformation in the way women are depicted in cinema. Maybe it is the reflection of the society we live in, or maybe it is a portrait of the society we dream to live in, truly Diva style.

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