

Role and Significance of Hindi Cinema in Gender Sensitisation

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Abstract

Cinema is meant and believed to entertain, to take the viewer to a world that is starkly different from the real one, a world which provides escape from the daily grind of life. Cinema is a popular media of mass consumption which plays a key role in moulding opinions, constructing images and reinforcing dominant cultural values. The paper deals with representations of women characters in mainstream Bollywood movies. It is deemed appropriate to examine this issue because women are a major chunk of the country's population and hence their portrayal on screen is crucial in determining the furtherance of already existing stereotypes in the society. The review begins with a discussion on the field of feminist film criticism and how mainstream Hindi Cinema has restricted itself to defined sketches of womanhood. It also undertakes some glimpses from popular films to analyse this process of stereotyping the „other“ – considering that reality in mainstream cinema is constructed from the male view point. A section is devoted to discussion on contemporary realistic brand of cinema and its understanding of women. In conclusion, a debate ensues on whether mainstream Hindi cinema has been successful in portraying Indian women of different shades in a society dominated by patriarchal values.

Keywords: *significance, gender, sensitization, cinema, Hindi, role, bollywood, movies, women, Indian.*

Introduction

Sexism is a sociocultural and psychological construct existing since ages. The popular hindi cinema as a mode of influencing public mindset and opinion, is also inflicted by it. The current discussion centers on the gender role stereotyping and sexism portrayed in the mainstream Indian movies of Bollywood. We also highlight the possible reasons behind the continued sexism in cinema, and the bidirectional influence of popular movies on the society and vice versa. We conclude that the portrayal is changing with increased awareness despite the challenges present, and a continuous attempt at promoting gender equality at all levels will help shape the sociocultural beliefs and public perceptions in the long run.

Sexism is the prejudice, stereotype, or discrimination, on the basis of sex, typically against women. It is seen to exist in various socio-occupational fields all over the world, including the hindi cinema. The movies are often seen to under represent and misrepresent women as well as stereotype gender roles across the globe. This article focuses on the Indian scenario involving portrayal of women in the popular Bollywood cinema that are mainstream movies and its evolution over the years. [1,2]

Since the 1950s, movies made in this industry have undergone several conceptual and technical changes. Talking about the female representation, there were fewer women working in the industry

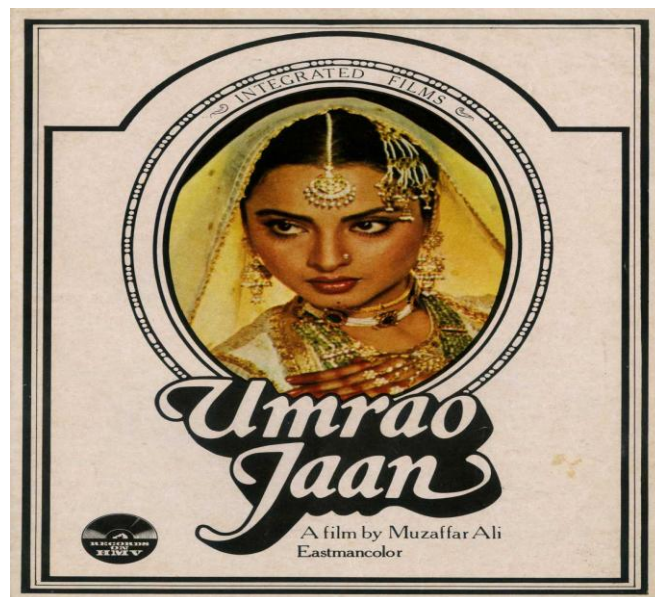
as directors, actors, producers, scriptwriters, and so on, to start with. The general behind-the-scene male dominance was reflected on the screen as well. Gradually, female representation increased. But interestingly, the inherent sexism did not go away. For example, in the older movies, female leads or characters were usually the mother or romantic interest or wife of the male leads, with the objective of supporting them in their life endeavors. The women were there to add “beautiful reliefs” in between the real-life struggles and difficulties faced by the heroes. The ones defying general societal norms were mistresses, vamps, club-dancers, women who harbored habits like smoking or drinking, or women who expressed sexuality and sexual interest. The costumes were also designed to depict the same, with “good” women wearing more of traditional clothes and “not-so-good” women being scantily clothed. [3,4]

From this kind of overt sexism in the early days, the movies evolved over time, and sexism as well as misogyny became implicit. Despite attempts to create roles for women working in different careers like knife-thrower (Jaya Bachchan in *Zanjeer*) and tanga-driver (Hema Malini in *Sholay*), the roles never transcended beyond the gender archetypes of the Indian society. They ended up being just fancy add-ons to the main male lead. Even movies like *Mother India* did not talk about the lady’s choice to become the savior or fighter. Her taking that path was contingent on her family, husband, and children, to fulfil their needs. The typical characterization of “good women” in Hindi cinema can be summed up as being domestic, virtuous, unambitious, prioritizing family over self, submissive, religious or god-fearing, chaste, and essentially additional and dispensable. Another type of characterization is objectification. This is done in two ways. The first is the overt way, that is, making the women wear skimpy clothes, songs or visuals focusing on the bare body parts, sensuous framing (e. g. , rain scenes like the controversial *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* song), and so on. The second and the more subtle way is the character framing such as like a pawn for the male lead’s advancement or progress. An example can be Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s *Naram Garam* where the female lead was continuously used as marital bait for Amol Palekar’s job security and progress. This was one of the so-called feel-good, light-hearted movies as was Mukherjee’s genre. However, none of them, along with the mainstream movies like *Sholay* or *Mughal-e-Azam*, ever defied the gender stereotypes. [5,6]



The third kind of character is that of the “unacceptable and villainous” women. This includes, in addition to the ones mentioned before, women interacting with multiple men, having relationships with men before or outside of marriage, etc. The same, when shown in context of men, has not been considered an offence. Male adultery or polygamy or flings in the films were usually accepted at

the end with a tearful reconciliation with the wife, who was supposed to bear with it by virtue of her sex (e. g., *Silsila*; anyone can hardly miss the negative emotions associated with Rekha's character, whereas Bachchan's was craftily acquitted). Women who worked in the offices or elsewhere either did so to support ailing or failing husbands and families, or had to leave jobs as those disrupted their domestic routines. In fact, there have been movies where "good" daughters-in-law took care of all household chores, including caregiving of "spiteful" mothers-in-law, and "defiant" daughters-in-law continued work, smoked and drank, wore glamorous and dark-colored makeovers, and so on. Here, it should also be mentioned that in all such movies, mothers-in-law were usually depicted as the torturous and troublesome people. Fathers-in-law or husbands merely played victims of the situation. [7,8] Once in a while, a younger brother-in-law of loose moral standing would appear, but again largely attributable to the mother-in-law's excessive indulgence. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was another surge of misogyny and sexism when movies like *Saajan Chale Sasural*, *Biwi No. 1*, and *Gharwali Baharwali* were made. They not only upheld the sexist beliefs but also went a few steps ahead by showing how males were justified in being adulterous with inadequacy of women being responsible for such behavior of men. These were in line of *Silsila*, but reversed the subtlety by being abominably and nauseatingly explicit. In these movies, the women gave rise to feelings of contempt or anger or hatred, whereas the males were rational victims. Men not marrying courtesans despite die-hard romantic affairs was given a tragic undertone, but such behaviors were somehow never questioned (*Umrao Jaan*).

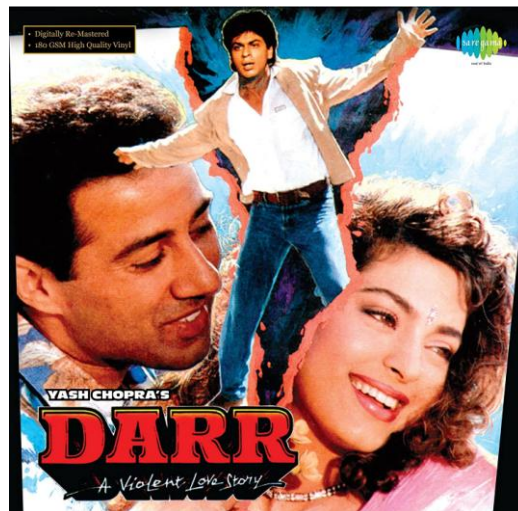


No courtesan, then or now ever got back at the wrongdoers. It was more allowable if they silently accepted their fates. Late 1990s and 2000s continued as the flagbearers of sexism with mainstream blockbuster films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, *Hum Saath - Saath Hai*, and *Hum Aapke Hai Koun*. . .!, *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar*, *Border*, *Sarfarosh*, *Hera Pheri*, *Baazigar*, and *Rangeela*, to name a few. The hero falling for a girl in the college based on her ability to pull off short clothes as well as her devotion to tradition, trained doctors turning into devout "housewives" performing child delivery only for in-laws' family, unmarried outspoken women being the vamps who broke families, the lead female silently marrying the love interest's older brother because of the obligation to duty after the sister's death (not to speak of the naiveness where the lady never bothered to clarify whom she was

marrying until the wedding invitations were printed), a young girl debuting as a heroine in a movie being praised only for looking good and dancing sultrily, etc. are some of the examples. [9,10]

Discussion

Sexuality of women has been another taboo in Indian cinema, and certain actors/actresses have permanently been associated with sexual explicitness, and have only been seen in that light. They hardly landed any different role because of the stereotyping by viewers and directors alike. Movies like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Darr*, *Anjaam*, *Tere Naam*, *Wanted*, among many, normalized stalking, sexual harassment, and assault so much so that love became synonymous with such behaviors among the youth. Either the women in these movies finally fell in love with the perpetrator, or the perpetrator died at the end almost becoming a martyr in love. Characters, worthy of being imprisoned and punished, were made into enigmas of love. The objectification, humiliation, and disrespect of women rose to another height. Multiple sexual crimes have been reported countrywide where the perpetrators expressed being influenced by the Hindi movies. [11]



In the last two decades, there has been a change in the overt portrayal as we were discussing earlier. Gender role stereotypes have changed their presentation. One example is the movie *Jab We Met* which boasted of a differently shown female lead. Though the character of *Geet* was commendable from many aspects, the stereotyping cannot be missed. She was made into a happy-going, imaginative, impulsive girl at the cost of a sense of responsibility or rationality. Then came the more recent *Kabir Singh* with a large-scale normalization of intimate partner violence, abuse, and misogyny in the name of love. Others include the *Housefull* series, *Dabangg*, *Student of the Year* series, and so on. There are several directors trying to bring out a real depiction of women in movies as in life. But these attempts are often offset by the films still promoting gender role stereotypes in various ways. Gender role bias for women goes hand-in-hand with that for men. Vulnerability, helplessness, delicacy, sacrifice, kindness, and generosity are mostly believed as feminine qualities, whereas men are to protect, fight, argue, assert, and progress financially and occupationally. In a movie named *I Hate Luv Storys*, the mother's character of Imran Khan (the male lead) was heard saying that she had wanted a son and was given a daughter instead, since Khan's character was crying over phone. Just a small dialogue in a movie thus can reflect gender role bias and impact public perceptions. Films like *Fashion*, *Corporate*, though known as women-centric, ended up conforming to the social gender bias and gender archotyping. [11,12]

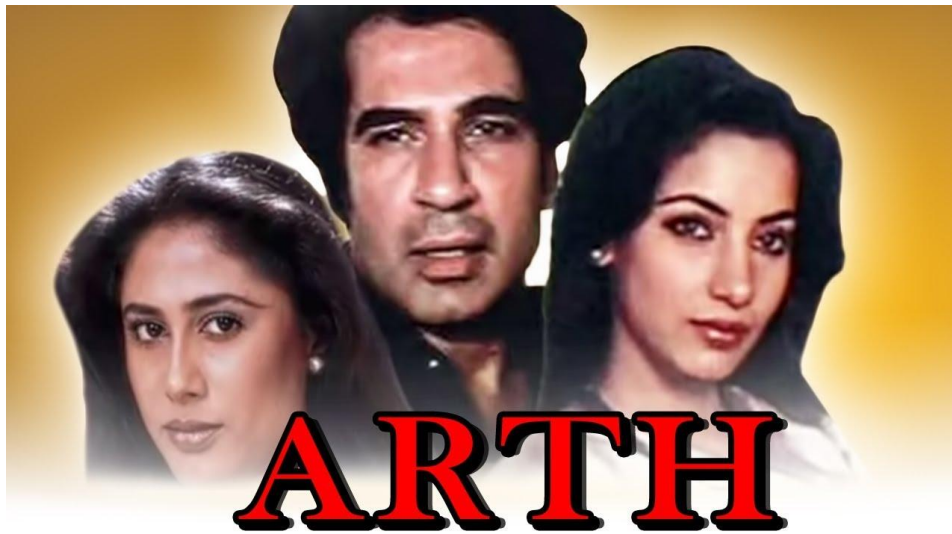


The lead female in *Fashion* suddenly giving up ambition to become a mother and becoming conscientious of morality and rights and wrongs only after giving in to cocaine and racism (abrupt sexual interaction with a black fellow was what brought about the psychological awakening in the lady), the one in *Corporate* setting an example of poor professional decision-making capacity (sacrifice for love, again) despite being a hardcore professional, were nothing but characters formed on the basis of social stereotypes. Despite a definite effort to change the depiction of women in the Indian cinema in last one or two decades, the mainstream movies, thus, have ended up showing women as either being the goddess-type, or the impulsive-irrational-irresponsible-type, or the amoral-type. The general portrayal of women as balanced characters, at least devoid of such dramatic dichotomous categorization, still has a long way to go.

Results

The icing on the cake is the new-age popularity of item songs and raps commodifying women, their body parts, and value. Item or cabaret songs of older movies showed women in revealing clothes and unacceptable demeanor. With the visual objectification, went the lyrics of the songs like *Fevicol*, *Sheela*, *Munni*, *Jalebi Bai*, *Choli Ke Peeche*, *Mujhko Ranaji Maaf*, and many more. Women were made into mere objects of “desire and lust,” devoid of dignity. Then came the rap culture that grew so popular as to be played everywhere from children’s parties to nightclubs. Continued promotion of stalking (*Aaja Meri Gaadi Mein Baith Jaa*), and devaluation of women (*Kudi Mainu Kehndi*, *Blue Eyes*, *Sunny Sunny*), along with the humiliating videos, crept their way up to the movies and music to this extent that it is hard to find a mainstream movie nowadays which does not have a similar soundtrack. While some may argue that these are just lyrics based on individual preferences, we need to be aware of the deep-seated influence this popular entertainment has on all of us, especially the children and adolescents. [13, 14]

There are movies, as we mentioned earlier, that have tried for many years to break the gender role stereotype. *Mirch Masala*, *Arth*, *Fire*, *Water*, *Daman*, *Queen*, *Kahaani*, *Chandni Bar*, *Ijaazat*, *That Girl in Yellow Boots*, *Masaan*, *Margarita with a Straw*, *15 Park Avenue*, *Astitva*, *My Brother...Nikhil*, *Unfreedom*, *Lajja*, and *Lust Stories* are to name a few. Women were depicted with human needs in most of these movies, with both virtues and vices.



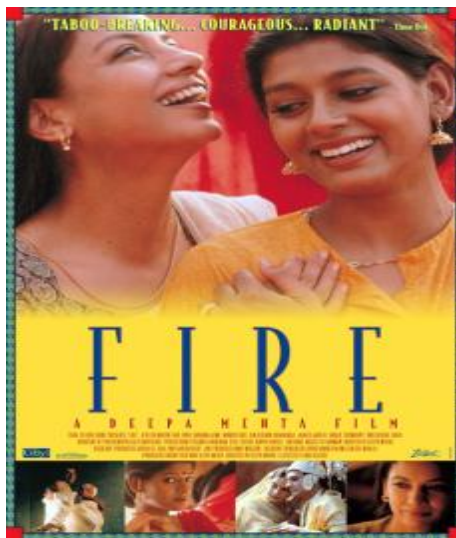
They dealt with women's perspectives on speaking against ongoing neglects, abuses, humiliation, and dignity despite the profession chosen (barmaid, prostitute, masseuse, homemaker, or anything), independence in living and decision-making, and ambitions. They also showed issues like socio-political exploitation of widows in Varanasi, same-sex love, societal intolerance of women breaking stereotypes, and so on. These movies have, however, been categorized traditionally as art films or parallel movies that do not earn enough revenue at the box office. Fortunately, this boundary has blurred in the recent times, though not completely abolished. A number of such films were socio-political disasters, whereas movies like *Sholay*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, etc. kept attracting viewers for many years. [15,16]

Here, it will be pertinent to discuss the paradox of women empowerment and reinforcement of patriarchy in Hindi cinema. Movies like *Mother India*, *Fashion*, *Corporate*, *Veere Di Wedding*, and so on fall under this type which tried to empower women but from under the ambit of patriarchy. Men of different dispositions or circumstances empowering women without really a concept of self-identification and autonomy are visible in these movies. In relatively newer films, depiction of liberated women as indulging in traditional male habits of smoking, drinking, sexual advancement, masturbation, though arguably a progressive step, equates gender independence with such things which, in the core, have very weak link with gender equality, if at all. Women have often ended up surrounding their lives and life decisions based on the marital prospect. Some female characters are shown possessing less of intellect, and more of rebelliousness. Paradoxically, such reflections are rooted deep in the patriarchal system and values. Defiance of classically feminine qualities propagated by patriarchy simply reinforces patriarchy, rather than challenging it. Another problem with such films is that they portray gender equality as a complete antithesis to the social belief. It gives rise to debates, and equation of equality with unacceptable behaviors (many behaviors like promiscuity and substance use are theoretically harmful for both sexes). The entire idea of feminism is brought down to another extremist belief with subsequent devaluation of gender equality.

Implications

The influence of movies, advertisements, and television shows on the mindsets of people is found considerably huge. Movies can have significant effect on gender stereotyping as found by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro. There are various theories on how the popular media can affect the emotion, behavior, and cognition at large. There are theories of minimal effects, theory of a strong effect,

cultivation theory, and so on. Gender role stereotypes and sexism shown in the popular cinema may impact public opinion formation and beliefs and attitude wherein imitation, idolization, normalization, and sensitization to gender inequality play a role. The attempt at the real-life application of the shown attributes by the youth and older adults is a behavioral manifestation of the same. It is also worth of exploring why sexism exists in the cinema. The first theory is the sociocultural framework of attitude, values, and beliefs impacting the directors' portrayal and viewers' responses. It is proposed that the creators (directors, producers) belong to the sociocultural framework with the specific notion on gender role stereotypes which get reflected in the characters they form. Viewers also seem to identify more with a character conforming to their belief systems. Thus, complying with the existing gender prejudices attracts more viewers and thus becomes commercially successful. Any inconsistency in the inherent attitude, value, and belief system shown in the media tends to give rise to dissatisfaction, resulting in non-viability of the movie or show or advertisement in the financial and social domains. Thus, it is the easier way out adopted by many. The next theory is that of power structure. The sociopolitical power structure is threatened by differently painted characters. This might give rise to unrest, ban, and violence, as observed with movies like *Fire*, and *Water*, where the director had to be offered protection against conformist vandalism. The third theory is of cognitive dissonance.



This is closely related to the first theory with a focus on the psychological construct. Conflicting beliefs give rise to cognitive dissonance, and thus distress in an individual. An individual may change his/her belief system, add new beliefs to rationalize one belief and devalue the other, or choose to be selectively exposed to one kind of information, to reduce dissonance. The first option is the most difficult, and hence not adopted by the most.

It is imperative to state that popular movies have been an integral part of our lives at all stages. Besides humming to a known tune, heated debates about plots and critical reviews about performance, gradually yet deeply have also influenced how we think (stereotypes), what we feel (prejudice), and how we act (discrimination). Movies or shows or advertisements creating cognitive dissonance will, thus, not be acceptable on a larger scale. This is true for the viewers as well as the creators. Female underrepresentation, male gaze, dichotomous characterization of heroines, and vamps are all manifestations of these sociocultural and cognitive obstacles. Item songs or raps objectifying women gaining incredible viewership and audience in cinema, streaming platforms, and other establishments (restaurants, pubs, parties) show the ease with which popular belief takes over rationality and judgment. Condemnation of such movies is restricted to a single group of

people, often categorized as activists, feminists, or likewise. The bidirectional influence of social systems and popular media, thus, ends up forming a vicious cycle. [17,18]

Conclusions

Difficulties in promoting and making a sensible movie is multifold. There are, however, glimpses of hope. Several directors, producers, and songwriters continue to create in a gender-neutral way, and promote gender equality, even in the face of all challenges. This review points out several gender-insensitive lacunae that exist but do not aim to criticize the years of dedication, hard work, and labor put in at all levels for the making of movies/advertisements. Attitudes and approaches are changing, both from directors and crew as well as the public.

A trend of sensible real-life media has been observed in the recent years. The number of movies/shows/advertisements defying sexism and educating about gender equality has increased. Many well-known artists have come forward calling out on the age-old misogynist depictions. Awareness of own rights has risen among women. Voicing one's opinions has been easier with the advent of social media. The lack of validation from the peer on not conforming to sociocultural norms has reduced to a considerable extent. The occupational underrepresentation of women has also come down. All these have led to a strengthening of expression of desires and rights in women. Though the vicious cycle of sociocultural belief system and media depiction of gender biases is not easy to break, it is important to acknowledge the baby steps toward that goal. To conclude, the only way to abolish sexism from being portrayed on the popular cinema is to abolish it from the common mindsets, where the popular cinema play a crucial role. Organizations promoting sexual health and gender equality (the Indian Psychiatric Society, or any other administrative body or nongovernment organizations) can participate by issuing position statements as frameworks to follow. Despite initial risks of commercial failure and sociocultural resistance, film and cinema (given their popularity) should actively collaborate with relevant organizations to bring about change which is sustainable in the long run. [19]

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