

Representation of Historical Women Characters in Bhansali's films

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Film critic Bilal Qureshi describes: "In Bhansali, cinema sarees flow across burning oil lamps, beautifully dressed women walk into flames, and temples shake amid thunderstorms as swirling cameras dance to folk compositions. Operatic gorgeous and always infused with something invariably Indian".

Sanjay Leela Bhansali who is known for grandeur, spectacles, and magic in his craft, worships his art and firmly believes in "frame is sacrosanct". He belongs to an old school of filmmaking where he wants to construct his own world in a studio rather than real locations so that he can control and create many aspects of filmmaking like lighting, sound, colour palette, etc. His two films Bajirao Mastani and Padmavaat, are historical films, screened on the big screen from Bhansali's lenses. His art is based on spontaneity like in terms of Hannah Ardent, he derives his excellence in spontaneity when the set is constructed, his characters are in costumes and makeup and when all elements of filmmaking are ready, he comes up with different ideas and notions about the art (mise-en-scene) and magic is created in the shot and power (Creative and intellectual) appear spontaneously. Thus spontaneity is a key to his art and his endless search for excellence makes his craft unique from the rest. Constantly reacting to space spontaneously at a given point in time is for him searching for "excellence" and "magic". One more striking feature of Bhansali is how he represents his female protagonist on the screen. He considers his heroine as the lovechild of Gurudatta and Meena Kumari. So it is very interesting to analyze how he represents his heroines in certain ways, what kind of ideological values are dispensed through their representation?

In these two films, Bajirao Mastani and Padmavaat, there are the following main female characters - Mastani, Kashibai, Padmavati, and Meherunissa. In these two films, two predominant- female characters Mastani and Padmavati are played by A-list star Deepika Padukone. Bhansali has used the star text of Padukone to portray his female characters.

Both Mastani and Padmavati is second wife of Bajirao and Rawal Ratan respectively. Both belonged to different religions and different communities. Both are extremely beautiful, a priceless possession. Wars are waged for them, one within the home and another within the empire. Both are princesses of respective kings and both perform the duties of Kshatraniyas. Both are ideal wives who are madly in love with their husbands. Both die at the end to merge with their husband's souls respectively. Both are spectacular dancers. We can see from the entry of these two characters - Mastani is portrayed as a warrior princess of Bundelkhand and Padmavati as a "nayab khoobsurat cheez", a priceless pearl of Singhal, in whose search Rawal Ratan travelled a thousand miles and Allah-ud-din longs for each and every nayab cheez of this world. In the beginning, Padmavati is showcased in all-white Sinhalese attire with minimal jewelry highlighting her nose ring - a Sinhalese identity. After her wedding to Rawal Ratan, Rani Padmavati is seen completely covered from head to toe. It actually underlines her identity as a priceless possession of Rawal Ratan, so of Mewar's and

so of the Rajput community. This identity of her is intact throughout the film, in her costumes, jewelry, and makeup. We don't find Sinhalese identity representation of Padmavati after her wedding, except for her nose ring. After her marriage, to Rawal Ratan, she completely adopts all Rajput traditions and customs, surprisingly even the Mewari language. This complete loss of identity (Sinhalese) of Rani Padmavati after her wedding is thus celebrated as an ideal Hindu wife.

Padmavaat is a classic example of 'aristocratic feudal romance' so as Bajirao Mastani a term derived from M. Madhavprasad. In this medieval, pre-modern era, the notion of 'private' doesn't exist. But the turning point in the film is encroachment of privacy of a royal couple by a priest. The voyeuristic, scopophilic, and narcissistic male gaze has shaped the whole narrative structure. Through this gaze", the" sphere of private is invented, which is anachronistic of the times. This unsatisfied egoistic gaze later fuel Khilji's gaze who just wants to possess Padmavati out of lust. When her blurred image is covered under smoke and is reflected into the mirror for a few seconds, Khilji couldn't see her face. His egoistic male gaze invite Rawal Ratan into his trap. These are the points of contestation and the whole Rajput Community is against such lustful, greedy, foreign Islamic gaze at their Rajput queen who is objectified in the film.

In Padmavati, the team 'Padm' means a lotus flower. "Padm" is sacred in Hinduism & Buddhism. In Buddhism, lotus blooms whenever enlightened Buddha laid his feet. Indian poets two compare women's eyes with lotus. Padmavati, the one who has beautiful eyes. Here it is very much applicable to the star text of Deepika Padukone who is gifted with divine and beautiful eyes. Even Padmavati's entry and her character is established through close up when she tries to hunt down a deer. The camera captures her beautiful emotive eyes which unfold the story of Padmavaat in the film. While introducing Rani Padmavati to Allah-ud-din Khilji, Raghav Chetan praises Khilji and says he would become second sikandar only when she would be with him. He slowly enters into a pond filled with water, where Khilji is seated. After hearing the description of such a divine beauty, Khilji ask him whether such divine beauty exists in reality. Then Raghav Chetan came up with a lotus from the pond and shows it to Khilji and says if you possess her, Mewar is yours, Hind is yours... With the help of "Padm" as a symbol, he hypnotizes A. Khilji and instils lust to possess her.

When Padmavati comes to Delhi to rescue Rawal Ratan, on hearing this news an injured Khilji is seated on his with a "Padm" in his hand. He lustfully smells it just like he smells perfume on the bodies of women. And when he sees Rawal Ratan, he immediately throws of "Padm" as he is intimidated by his presence.

Coming from a Buddhist background, Padmavati accepts all rituals, traditions, and customs of a Rajput culture. She selflessly and unconditionally worships Shivlinga and does abhishek and also seeks mannat (blessings) from him from time to time. We can see her constant presence in the temple from the day of the attack of A. Khilji on Chittor, and especially in a scene where Rawal Ratan proceeds to meet Khilji all alone, unarmed. Rawal Ratan promises her to return to Chittorgarh before the rising of the moon but later when she

learns that day is an Amavasya, dust storm follows which indicates arrival of a danger. Later on Padmavati ties a thread to trishul and leaves a lightened lamp (diya) into the water. She also promises herself not to see her face in the "mirror" till Rawal Ratan comes home. In the climax scene, we can see Rani Padmavati in a frontal address to all women and preaching them about Rajput heroism and valor and sacrifice. She asks them not to show their shadows to the enemy and that would be the biggest defeat of Allah-ud-din. The film ends when doors are shut and A. Khilji couldn't even get a foot towards Jauhar Kund, let alone their shadows.

In Bajirao Mastani, till Mastani reaches to Shaniwarwada, Poona, her plural identity is emphasized "For the character of Mastani, there was very little historical reference, and I had to read and recreate everything keeping in mind the 18th-century era. It is a challenging task, to design for a period movie and one has to recreate not just the costumes but the entire look. I traveled to places like Nashik, Pune, Paithan, and Ajanta for references to the Maratha Empire. I also studied the material and miniature paintings at the Salarjung museum in Hyderabad as the Nizams and Peshwas belonged to the same period. Then there were Raja Ravi Varma's Paintings that gave me insight into the kind of dressing they had and also the look they preferred. It was all their historical references that helped me recreate the royal look for the characters in the movie, says Anju Modi.

In the film, when Mastani reaches Pune, Shaniwarwada, she is interrogated about her lineage, identity, and community. From Deewani Mastani song, her Islamic identity is re-emphasized even though her father Raja Chhatrasal is Hindu a Rajput. So as per patriarchal norms, Mastani must be considered Hindu, but in the film her Islamic identity is emphasized. Mastani is considered as "other" also because she is constructed as a warrior princess, her participation in public life maker her outsider. She is exploited doubly, first as a woman and secondly as a Muslim woman. She is ridiculed as a 'courtesan' even though belonging to Raja Chhatrasal's Royal family. She is first put into a harem of courtesans. Later on, Bajirao Gift her Kothrud Aiwas away from Shaniwarwada (main residential area). Even now, in the contemporary saved end, Muslims live in the outskirts in "ghettos".

She is constantly under attack from Brahmanical patriarchy who never accepts her into Peshwai because of her Muslim identity. Neither Bajirao nor Mastani insists upon her conversion to Hinduism to legitimize their marriage and consummation. Rather we can see religious manifestations and practices through performing namaaz, the festival of Eid etc. Mastani remains Islamic throughout the film and her Islamic identity is constructed through her costumes-long anarkalis, lehengas along with jewelry big nose ring, mangtika, jhoomer,passa.

For the first time, Mastani wears Maharashtraian marathi jewellery at the naming ceremony of Raghoba like Panmani set (a necklace) and later on in Pinga, she adorned all Marathi jewellery along with "nauvari" (nineyardsaree). She is constantly under attack from brahmnicalpatriarchy who never accept her into Peshwai because of her muslim identity, and threatens to abandon Peshwai, if Mastani enters into Shaniwarwada. Later on brahmins try to kill her and her son ChattrapatiShahu as a patriarchal authority do not intervene in the

personal life of Bajirao, even here as the film is set on pre-modern era and such a separation of public and private is anachronistic of the times. In those days, polygamy was common. Bajirao constructed conjugal space in Kothrudniwasbut later an invited her to Shaniwarwada (public space) where their romance and marriage was unacceptable to parental authority, kin and orthodox Brahmins who waged life threatening attack on Mastani.

Kashibai and Meherunissa, both supporting female characters are equally important. In the beginning, both are shown as a childlike, innocent characters from prestigious aristocrat families, Kashi from prestigious Maratha, and Meherunissa from an Afghan tribe. Both are, shown on first wives - Kashi of Bajirao I and Meherunissa of Allah-ud-din Khilji. Both Kashi and Meherunissa protect their respective husbands, one accepts and legitimizes the relationship and another defends Allah-ud-din from committing a crime and fight against "lust". In the end, both loses their husbands Bajiraoto a disease and Allah-ud-din to lust.

Kashi is portrayed as a 'Bharat mata' who can't be sexualized as she is a holy sacrosanct. She wears a white saree and carry a saffron Kesari flag and dances to the tunes of "AlbelaSajanAjo re". Bharatmata is never shown fighting. This symbolism is carried forward as Kashicarrying a saffron flag and wearing a military headgear. The film doesn't sexualise her and compliments her status as a Hindu nation. In an intimate sequence, between her and Bajirao, camera more focuses on his body parts and not hers.

Like Bharat Mata, she is shown standing above pain and jealousy accepting Mastani into her husband's life. Apart from protecting and guarding her 'home' preaching patriarchal values to her sons, etc she is seen protecting her husband's desires and love interest. The song and dance sequence "Pinga" actually legitimizes Bajirao-Mastani's conjugality by Kashibai and other ladies who dance together on a mixed dance forms of Lavani and Mangalagaur. Kashibai releases Bajirao-I from their matrimonial bond in a scene which is a classic example of "shamefaced voyeurism" as defined by Metz (M. Madhavprasad) Bajirao's guilt ridden glances to words his wife Kashi where Kashinamedhim a story of Radha-Krishna and asked why people always would remember a lover and not wife. Bajirao responded that she could give him any punishment. But when Kashi asked him not to enter her chamber ever again thus absconding she from Bajirao's private life is anachronistic and it reflects contemporary Hindu monogamous pact and consensual marital consummation. Thus dissolving marital bonds particularly sexual intimacy make Kashi independent, fierce and powerful agency, again ahead of times as polygamy was very common those days. The representation of Kashi is again a modern feminist construction where she put her pride first before her marriage which was again ahead of times.

Meherunissais constructed as the 'other' of Padmavati. She represents Hindu nationalist Stereotype regarding Muslim women as victimised by their own community male members. Meherunissa can't be constructed as a Bharat Mata even though she is a Malika-e-Hindustan, as she is a Muslim, alien to native (Hindu) Culture as per the ideals of early nationalists, especially in Bengal who considers Bharatmata as a serene, riding a lion and carrying a sword, according to Bijayanti Roy.

Nilanjan Chatterjee argued that the motif of conquering a 'woman' from 'different religion (if not region) exemplifies the metaphor of conquering the nation who is female in sex and 'other' in religion. As the dominant superpower in the masnad of Delhi is the Muslims (secondarily Mughals), it is important to saturate Mastani's identity as Muslim.

Sikata Bannerjee in *Gender, Nation and Popular film in India*, argued that "Focus on the purity and chastity of female-bodies stems from their role as borderguards. By borderguards I mean the notion that the boundaries separating "we the people" from "them" is represented by chaste female bodies" (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Chastity and purity of women to be guarded so as to function as borderguards.

Terhi Hannula on this theoretical construct justified jauhar committed by Padmavati along with other Rajput women who act as borderguards and their men go to border to wage war so as to protect their chaste women and their honour. According to him, there are 3 steps through which jauhar scene conflates female chastity with nation. First, Indian nation is equated with a Hindu identity. Second, the preservation of chastity of the Hindu female body is equated with the honour and virtue of the Hindu nation. Thirdly, Padmavati's suicide combining victimhood and feminine power come to be symbolized as the motherland or Mother goddess. (Terhi Hannula, in *Martial woman*)

In the climax scene, whole Chittorgarh bled. And this sequence is beautifully choreographed. Wall of the palace are carved with palms wearing kangan (kadas) signifying the strength, courage and solidarity of Rajput women. This is a legitimization of Rajputi power by showering unity and support to the ruler. As rightly said by Padmavati, Rajputi kangan is as strong as Rajputi sword (talwar). By she urges all Rajput women to come together and defeat the enemy by not even showing their shadows. This would be the ultimate moral defeat of Allah-ud-din. Rani Padmavati along with other Rajputi women, all dressed in red and pink shades flow like a river flowing into the ocean of Jauharkund which is digitally created.

Thus, Rani Padmavati is celebrated as "Mother Goddess" who world uphold all customs and traditions of her husband's community even at the cost of her own life. Here Padmavati has no right to live after her husband's death and also to commit Jauhar, she takes a prior permission of her husband by saying - (आपके इजाजतके बिना हम मरभी नहीं सकते) "Cannot die without your permission also") As a mark of their matrimonial bond and love, she asks him to make impressions of his palms on a white cloth (like सेला) so as to carry it as a symbol of their unification till her last breath.

"Mohe Rang Do Laal" is a solo dance and song sequence. It's a site of female sexual repository unleashes libidinal energy through a choreography of body & space movement. Here a female body is a site of 'male gaze', a spectacular pleasure is achieved through heaving of breasts, mouth sensuously open. Here camera focuses on Padukone's 3 parts of the body-face, breasts and waistline. Lyrics speak of

मोहे रंगदो लाल, मोहे रंगदो लाल
नंद के लाल, लाल
छेड़ो नही बस रंगदो लाल
मोहे रंगदो लाल
देखूं देखूं तुझको मैं होके निहाल
छुलो कोरा मोरा काच सा तन
नेनभर क्या रहे निहार
मोहे रंगदो लाल

Her glass skinned (cotemporary Korean skin care standard) transparent body is more illuminated through off white gold ghaghara choli with minimal jewellery - mangtika and stoned nose ring, highlighting only her lips and eyes. Her breasts are draped in a golden blouse and transparent golden chunri enhancing the concept of "Kaachka tan" glass skinned body. Only her lips and hands are (laal) red coloured. Her chunri is draped diagonally between her breasts as a diaphanous rather than covering them completely. Camera captures her tall, slender, slim body through long shots where she after takes 'girkis' of katthakas and her facial expressions are best captured in mid close and close-up shots where her eyes and lips, her nose-ring and bindi are highlighted. Deepika's gestures are best captured in mid shots where we see red colour only on her hands and lips. Through this song, (Deepika's) Mastani's plural identity (Hindu lineage) is constructed on Radhe-Krishna, Hindu tradition. "Deewani Mastani"

Apsara, according to Hinduism, is a wife of Gandharva, the court musicians of Indra. They dance to entertain and sometimes to seduce devtas and rishis. In this production number, Bhansali did not intend to portray Mastani as "courtesan", so in the beginning, he introduced her as has no apsara, a fairy tale, whose beauty has no comparison, whose beauty can just be imagined but does not exist in real word. Except Bajirao, others consider Mastani as courtesan, 'Other' - a spectacle to be looked at. Unlike Mohe Rang Do laal, we can see very few close ups in this song sequence. On the other hand, we can see long shots and bird's eye view shots on a large scale so as to show a huge, splendid luxurious extravaganza and spectacle reminding us of Mughal Sheesh Mahal. Bhansali took inspiration from Mughal-e-Azam for this song. It's the contemporary version of the classic "Pyarkiyatohdarnakya" where Anarkali expresses her love for Salim. In this song, Mastani confesses her love towards Bajirao emphasizing her madness, her passion for her love. Mastani along with her group of dancers occupies all of the space of the mahal (palace) with her magical moves and sweeps away spectator's attention into an imaginary world. And also hints at how narrative would unfold in later story as Mastani enters into the private world of Bajirao and Kashi.

From Deewani Mastani song, the film progressively renders her as a Muslim. She is thus doubly marginalised as a courtesan- she represents a socially unacceptable sexual but nonreproductive femininity.

"Death" is celebrated as a pure private conjugal space where Padmavati and RawalRatan and also Bajirao and Mastani would unite for forever. All these traditions and customs not only have huge impact especially on the psyche of spectators but also they do strengthen patriarchal structure and its values.

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