

CHANGING ROLES OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

Cinema, being a very powerful and effective media has portrayed the changing roles of women very minutely. The transformation of woman from a submissive wife has been changed to a dominant career oriented independent woman. Indian films have shown three faces of women – submissive, self-sacrificing mother wife and sister, glamorous vamps and dominating and confident woman. Contemporary Indian Cinema has seen a paradigm shift in its portrayal of women.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Submissive, Marginalized, Empowerment, Social hierarchies, Gender discrimination, Paradigm shift.

While thinking about representation of women in various art forms like painting, sculpture, literature, etc., we observe women submissive, passive and dependent at early phase. Cinema is no exception. As in literature films too represent women as house wives or homemakers whereas men are usually considered as breadwinners. From classical literature the role of woman is determined as Grihini, Sachiv, Sakhi, Mihta, Priyashishya Lilite Kalavidhau (Kalids : Raghuvansh). Patriarchy was highly visible not only in social structure but also in different art forms. From the pre-independence era the constant efforts of social reformers, thinkers and feminists, the place and the position of woman in society gradually began to change. Cinema, being a very powerful and effective media has portrayed this changing role of woman very minutely. The transformation of woman from a submissive wife has been changed to a dominant career oriented independent woman.

Indian Cinema, like the status of woman has undergone a drastic change. Films depicted mythological and historical stories where men were portrayed as warriors, heroes and role models, later it imitated Hollywood films and at present it is struggling and experimenting with innovative themes. Stories of today's films revolve around 'independent and confident woman'.

Indian films are quite popular among different Hindi or even non-Hindi spoken countries. Nearly hundred countries and four billion people watch Indian films with interest. Indian film industry, in this sense, is the largest industry compared with Hollywood's the production of 400 films per year, Bollywood produces approximately 1000 films every year. The first Indian Cinema was released in the year 1913 titled Raja Harishchandra was directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. Alam Ara (1931) was the first film with sound. At first the films were in black and white but later colour films appeared. The role of Cinema is quite pivotal as it portrays social problems and issues. Indian directors present social issues that affect women like, marriage, dowry, widow hood, rape, domestic violence, gender discrimination, etc.

Earlier women were not allowed to participate in films and men used to play female roles. In 1930, a change occurred and women from affluent families joined film industry. Devika Rani, Zubeida, Mehtab, Shobhana Samarth were the popular heroines of the time. The last two decades brought in a fresh perspective on the representation of women in industry, both on screen and behind the camera. Earlier women pursuing their careers in films were either actresses or play back singers. But today women are working as choreographers, costume designers, editors, screenplay writers, directors and producers.

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Indian films not only depicted women as marginalized and weak, but also institutionalized the patriarchal belief, perception and attitude in the psyche of the masses. In the last 70 years Indian cinema has depicted varied roles of women, ranging from a submissive wife, an ideal mother, a mere sex object to a powerful, strong, fierce and independent woman. Initially cast as mere decorative elements, and at times confined to roles as victims or martyrs, women in Hindi cinema have undergone a remarkable transformation. The women characters have transcended the traditional portrayal of abala nari, emerging as a figure of substance of strength. She has portrayed as an individual who fights for her rights, honour and dignity, rebels and protests against injustice.

Let us discuss the portrayal of ‘woman’ in certain specific films. *Mother India* (1957) directed by Mehboob, represents Indian family, traditional values of socialistic ideals. Radha, an ideal wife and daughter-in-law gets married to Shamoo. Sundar Chachi, Shamoo’s mother has raised him and for his marriage has taken a loan from Sukhial. Days pass in happiness but while working, heavy boulders roll on to Shamoo’s arms. Shamoo becomes physically unfit and helpless. He does not want to depend upon anyone, hence leaves his village, Radha and family. Now Radha takes over the family responsibilities and does everything for the sake of her family, like plowing land without bullocks. Unfortunately, Birju, her son who has transformed into a dacoit, tries to abduct a woman from her marriage. Radha shoots own son in order save the girl. Radha here emerges as a very strong woman who saves another woman.

Mirch Masala (1987) Ketan Mehta directed film is an excellent example of empowered woman. Sonbai (Smita Patil) works in a chilly factory and her husband leaves the village as he gets a job in railways. The Subhedar is attracted towards her and orders the head of the village to bring her to him. The headman brings a wrong woman, the next day Subhedar grabs Sonbai but she frees herself and runs to the chilly factory where she works. An old Muslim watchman Abu Miyan protects her. Headman’s (Mukhiya) wife is also not treated well by her husband and she tries to give support to Sonbai. All the men in the village have allied with Subhedar to hand over Sonbai to him. Sonbai hides herself in the chilly factory. Knowing this, Subhedar accompanied with all the men reaches factory and kills the watchman. As he approaches Sonbai, suddenly all the women throw bags of chilly powder on him. It is a revolt of women, an answer given to him. The ordinary village woman boldly rejects the advances of formidable authority. The movie projects an impressive chronicle of women’s empowerment.

Arth (1982) directed by Mahesh Bhatt is a very meaningful film based on the search of meaning of marital life. Wife (Shabana) experiences betrayal and abandonment when her husband leaves her for another woman (Smita Patil). She transforms from a woman shattered by betrayal into a symbol of resilience and independence. *Arth* stands as a compelling portrayal of a woman seizing control of her life and finding her path to happiness amidst the complexities of relationships.

Another sensational film is *Bandit Queen* (1994) directed by Shekhar Kapur. The film exhibits the harsh realities faced by women in rural India. The movie delves into the deeply entrenched social hierarchies, caste discrimination and gender-based violence. It is based on Malasen’s biography *India’s Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*. A woman of a lower caste, faces sexual abuse several times that lead her to become a leader of a gang of decoits. She

punished her rapists and evaded capture by the authorities and became a heroine, a Robin Hood figure.

Vikas Bahl directed *Queen* (2014) breaks the taboos of the society. Rani resides in Delhi in Rajouri Garden. Her marriage has been fixed but two days prior to her marriage, at the time mehendi programme, her fiancé refuses to marry her. But soon she gathers courage, gets over from shock and pain, leaves alone for her honeymoon to Paris. This typical middle class shy girls breaks all the barriers, lives fully, enjoys the smallest things, fulfills all her desires and gets back her confidence and self-respect. Her changed personality is appreciated by her fiancé and he wishes to marry her but she rejects him.

Raazi (2018) directed by Meghana Gulzar tells a tale of nationalism and strength of a woman. The film transcends traditional gender roles, portraying Sehmat a courageous and intelligent operative. Set against the back drop of the 1971 Indo-Pak war, an Indian woman married into a Pakistani military family works for Indian Intelligence World. She faces different challenges and becomes epitome of bravery. The same can be said about *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* directed by Sharan Sharma. It is a tale of a feminist father of his feisty daughter. It is the story of the first woman fighter pilot to fly cheetah helicopters in the Kargil war zone.

Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022) Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film unfolds a completely a different narrative of a young girl Ganga from a small village deceived by her lover, becomes prostitute in Kamathipura, later emerges as Gangubai, a dominating person who strives for the welfare of prostitutes and their children. She underlines sisterhood concept of feminism.

Still there are certain films where women are portrayed as glamorous dolls. They have been presented through the eyes of a largely male perspective. Cinema is made to entertain the spectators and the most susceptible component of entertainment in films are heroines. Item songs is an excuse to present beautifully dancing women in revealing and exposing clothes on the name of entertainment. Obscene films like *Murder*, *Hate Story*, *Jism*, *Ragini MMS*, etc. demean women as sex objects. In his 1972 essay, an art criticism, "Ways of Seeing", English art and Critic and Novelist John Berger said, "Men act, women appear, men watch women themselves being watched".

Still, we can say that contemporary Indian Cinema has seen a paradigm shift in its portrayal of women. The shift in the streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon, Prime and other have opened new opportunities for conventional themes. Ram Gopal Varma's *Nishabd* focusses on teenager's growing consciousness of sexuality, *Thappad* deals with domestic violence and "unspoken norms of marriage", *Pink* (2016) boldly asserts the principle that when a woman utters "No", it means "No". The film *Lapta Ladies* makes a commentary of relationship between women. It says –

Ghar ki aurate sas, nanad, jethani, devrani sabhi ban jati hai. Saheli nahi ban jati ek dusre ki.

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, *Mardani*, *Mom*, *Mrs. Chatterjee vs Norway*, *Lipstick under My Burgha* are other examples. Women as political leaders are presented through *Andhi* and *Rajneeti*.

Aparna Sen, Vijaya Mehta, Aruna Raje, Farah Khan, Zoya Akhtar, Mira Nair, Meghna Gulzar, Gouri Shinde are certain bold directors who changed earlier narrative and created women with complex characters. They changed the very definition of Bollywood heroines.

Yet there is much work to be done and there should be greater empathy and sensibility towards showcasing real women and problems they face.

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