REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN HINDI CINEMA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF COMMERCIAL AND PARALLEL CINEMA, POST 1980s

ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

Cinema is a medium of entertainment that reflects socio-cultural practices, customs and based on different ideologies. Hindi cinema or Bollywood is a male dominant industry that produces hundreds of films every year. Most of the films project gender-based social issues in which women are represented from a male viewpoint. Such projections vary from one genre to the other as in commercial Hindi cinema and the parallel cinema. The present study attempted to study different feminist approaches that go in filmmaking in these two distinct genres. Patriarchal values are some of the leading considerations that play dominant role in representation of women in these two genres of Hindi cinema.

Today, cinema structures and systems have changed because of heavy commercialisation, privatisation and globalisation. Hindi film industry is abundant with private investors or producers from the corporate world who influence the filmmaking process as well. Huge corporations with their own profit motives own media houses. These developments are bound to affect the manner in which media scrutinises and covers any issue – gender being an important one. Hindi commercial cinema holds popular appeal whereas art or parallel cinema engages with social issues, middle cinema and regional language cinema. Popular cinema and popular culture are intertwined. They derive inspiration from each other. Films are believed to be the opium of the Indian masses as people depend on this medium to help them escape to a world of fantasy. In a very explicit way, cinema shapes the cultural, social and political values of people of this country. While, the other forms of cinema are also important when it comes to the representation of women, drawing a comparative study between the commercial cinema and the parallel cinema has been the focus of this study.

During the past century Hindi cinema has witnessed a sea-change in the presentation of the women character. It has come a long way ever since the first full-length motion picture in India was produced by Dadasaheb Phalke, the pioneer of Indian film industry who brought together elements from Sanskrit epics to produce his *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), a silent film. The female roles in the film were played by male actors. The film marked a historic benchmark in the film industry in India. It was a commercial success and paved the way for more such films. From the very
first film, it has not been an easy ride. And one reason for this can be the ‘beauty’ which has evolved over time in Indian cinema. Actresses like Madhubala, Wahida Rehman were considered the queens of the Indian cinema during their reign.

For decades Hindi cinema has been male dominated. Themes are used to be explored from the male audience’s point of view and female actors are considered secondary to the male actors. Her role is used to chart out in the context of any male character that is central to the story line– be it hero, villain, father or an elderly male figure. She is devoid of any independent existence. This kind of straight jacketing limits the women’s role to provide glamour, relief, respite and entertainment. And these patriarchal values have been institutionalised in films like Dahej (1950), Gauri (1968), Devi (1970), Biwi ho to Aisi (1988), Pati Parmeshwar (1988) which depicted women as passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families.

Film scholar and author Shoma Chatterji says, “Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects. Each phase of Hindi cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal framework of the Indian society. The ordinary woman has hardly been visible in Hindi cinema.” It has commonly been in the action-packed movies of Akshay Kumar, Sunny Deol and Sunil Shetty, the actress was abruptly placed in the romantic track as a distraction for the viewer from monotonous bouts of violence. So, the moot question is how real were the women characters in the movies? This is something to debate about because values, ideals, principles; morals have dominated the framework in which these films are placed.

Hindi cinema has been essentially male-centric, leaving little space for the female counterparts to evolve and grow as versatile performers. As now we have been seeing increasing numbers of movies creating bold and beautiful of Bollywood. In the past too, we’ve had actresses portraying strong characters who fight the shackles of their social milieu and the very first film is Mother India released in 1957. Considered as one of the finest classics of Indian cinema, the movie looks at the struggle of a rural woman in India, who fights all odds to raise her two sons. The portrayal of the late actress Nargis Dutt is of a loving and brave
mother, who struggles to raise her family alone and in the end, saying true to her cause, she kills her evil son to save a woman’s honour.

Women in Indian cinema are born with certain assumptions ranging from cult movies to celluloid blockbusters like Sholay to more recent Fashion that employ themselves as in severe gender issues. They are portrayed either as damsels in distress or demented feminists or simple belly-shaking glam dolls whose sole ambition is to attract the attention of the male gender. In many Indian films it is a common trend to insert ‘item numbers’ which bear no rational connection to the film in anyways, but with an assumption that the film is easily associated. Sometimes the one song ends up making a mark for the film, such as ‘Munni’ from Dabangg, ‘Chikni Chameli’ of Agneepath or ‘Fevicol’ of Dabangg 2.

In order to present the modernity among women, Indian filmmakers have parachuted on an idea that the display of dancing girls in ‘minimum’ clothes is real expression of freedom. On a lighter note, our elder generation, earlier exposed to the “sensuous” Helen, is now face-to-face with the more “fatal” Bipasha Basu. But the Hindi cinema became male-dominated through the nineties and even now, to an extent, with the item song culture. The really big films — those which cross the coveted rupees one billion mark at the box office — objectify women.”

In the present day, the typical Indian woman, item number and individualism share an almost symbiotic relationship. These three ingredients have become the major part of Indian cinema. The stereotypical portrayal of women, which ruled Indian films till a very recent time, has been witnessing a remarkable change – be it the blood thirsty Priyanka from 7 Khoon Maaf, or no nonsense journalist Rani in No One Killed Jessica or Parineeti Chopra as the rebellious lover from Ishaqzaade, each of their characters stood apart from the conventional women and none of them had qualms about it.

Actresses like Vidya Balan (Paa, Dirty Picture, Kahani, Ishqiya) and Konkona Sen Sharma (Page 3, Life in a Metro, Mr. and Mrs. Iyer) have led this change of direction, who have appeared in strong and independent roles which for the time being shifted the camera’s focus from the women’s body to her identity as an individual.
Parallel cinema was a film movement in Indian cinema that originated in Bengal in the 1950s as an alternative to the mainstream commercial Indian cinema, represented especially by popular Hindi cinema. It began as a precursor of the Indian New Wave the next decade. The movement was initially led by Bengali cinema and produced internationally acclaimed filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Tapan Sinha and others. It is known for its serious content, realism and naturalism, with a keen eye on the socio-political climate of the times, and for the rejection of the dance-and-song numbers that are typical of mainstream commercial cinema.

One of the earliest parallel films in Hindi cinema was Chetan Anand’s Neecha Nagar (1946) that had won the Grand Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival and paved the way for those directors who wanted to show their talents through parallel movies. Though at that time the term ‘parallel cinema’ was not used for such movies, hence, it was only a few years later that the movie came to be known as one of the movies of this genre.

The Parallel Cinema movement began to take shape from the late 1940s to the 1960s which is considered the ‘Golden Age’ of Indian cinema. In the 1960s, the Indian government began financing independent art films based on Indian themes. By the early 1990s, the rising costs involved in film production and the commercialisation of the films had a negative impact on the parallel cinema. The fact that investment returns cannot be guaranteed made art films less popular amongst filmmakers. Political and economic turmoil, television and piracy proved to be fatal threat to parallel cinema, as it declined.

However, in parallel cinema women have always had an equal opportunity to portray their roles along with their male counterparts. Sometimes even the male actors are overshadowed by the female ones. The movie Arth is one of those movies where the female actors are given major roles. Here the two famous women of the parallel cinema, i.e., Smita Patil and Shabana Azmi, were put against the then famous actor of the same cinema, i.e., Kulbhushan Kharbanda. Both the women were so convincing in their roles that the audience could hardly find the need of the male actor in the movie.
This research work planned to do a comparative study of the gender-based considerations that go in filmmaking in two distinct genres of Hindi cinema i.e., commercial cinema and parallel cinema and thereby to study the comparison of these two genres of the Hindi cinema. It focused on the projection of female characters portrayed on screen and how the portrayal of the same character is different in both the genres. If a female actor acts well, the character has to be praised and recognised. But most of the times the male actor took away all the accolades from the female actor who is not given strong or powerful dialogues in the same scene. Though the female actor may still be recognised but will always be overshadowed by her male counterpart. Why such biasness in the commercial cinema? And why such freedom of portrayal of women characters in the parallel cinema? This question needs to dig some concrete answer which lies in some form of patriarchal considerations of male film producers.

Comparing the same characters of some female actors in these two genres is the main aspect of this thesis. To delve into the depth of the difference of the same characterisation of the commercial and the parallel cinema and to extract the main reason behind such a big difference is what this thesis was all about.

For instance, the character of Supriya Pathak in Bazaar (1982) was that of an obedient daughter who was forced to get married to the person she did not love. The similar character was played by Rakhee in Kabhi Kabhi (1976) who was forced to leave her beloved and marry someone else. But the portrayal of both the women in the same condition was quite different. When in Bazaar Supriya Pathak met her beloved for the last time, she had no such dialogues to deliver rather a song was played in the background and both the lovers bid farewell only with their expressions. Here both the lovers were given equal attention while projecting this melancholic situation.

Whereas, in Kabhi Kabhi when Rakhee had her last meeting with her lover, she was silent and her lover, played by Amitabh Bachchan, was given all the dialogues. The focus in that scene shifted to the lover rather than to the female character. Though both of the characters were going through a tough time but we can only sense the pain of the male character here. This shows how male characters are given more
importance in the commercial cinema while in the parallel cinema both the characters are given equal importance.

There is a number of research methodologies used in various researches. But in this particular research study content analysis and sampling were used as the two main research methodologies. In content analysis the properties of the content were systematically identified and then analysed. In this thesis, randomly selected films of some selected directors were kept as samples and were analysed in terms of gender based biasness.

In commercial cinema, whenever a woman is shown, she is shown satisfying men’s desires and is portrayed as raw material for producing and rearing children. The girls, who are shown in the barest possible outfits until they are married, are denied to have ‘say’ while choosing their life partners. The parents, the custodian of traditions, do that job for them. After getting married these women are mindlessly loaded with the weight of bangles, ornaments, and conventional clothes. Such a turnaround, while artistically displayed on screen, thins the morale of the girls who want to be the captains of their own boats.

In this research we focused on the same characters portrayed by women in commercial and parallel cinema and how the same character was different in both the genres. We observed how the characters have been differentiated. The characters may be as small as that of a maid or as powerful as that of a mother. This research took an account of all those nuances of the characters that has been portrayed on screen to enhance or overshadow a woman’s role.

Women always had the potential to act well on screen and stand tall with their male counterparts. There are cases when their potential is not completely shown to the world in order to boast the patriarchy that has always been omnipotent in our society in each and every sphere of the life. This thesis dwell deep inside the hidden potentials of the women of this particular sphere of life, i.e., Hindi cinema, and the study tried to hopefully come out having a solid proof that women have been and will always be equal to men when it comes to acting and portrayal of a powerful character.

Indian film industry is one of the prolific film industries of the world and surprisingly it was initiated by a pair of foreigners, the Lumiere brothers. Today
Indian cinema is at a very favourable position. With the help of new technology and vibrant creativity, Indian cinema is growing and crossing the borders to get appreciation throughout the world. There are several movies that are being exhibited and shown in various international film festivals. Indian movies are being recognised and appreciated by everyone around the globe. It was in 2013 that the Indian film industry celebrated its 100th year being one of the world’s most prolific film industries.

The main purpose of the cinema was to entertain and to educate the masses. Gradually it became a commercialised medium for people to earn money through making films. The commercial cinema is also known as the mainstream cinema. This kind of cinema is produced with a commercial aspect associated with it. In simple words commercial cinema is a business oriented cinema made for the mass in general. Mainly, all the movies that run in the theatres and shown on the television are the commercial movies. Commercial movies mostly work on a same formula and the structure of the movies is similar to make it a success.

Parallel movies are often known as the art films. These are unique, exclusive, unconventional, and have a signature style of the director or the team. Unlike the commercial movies, parallel films do not have similar themes or settings. They are diverse in terms of plots, themes, and subjects. They are mainly concerned about the social issues and evils related to the society.

The parallel movies came into the Hindi cinema during the 1970s and during the 80s it was at its peak. The 90s saw a decline in the parallel cinema and during the 2000s there was a resurgence in this genre in the Hindi cinema. Hence, the three major decades for the parallel cinema has been chosen for this study. Also, to make the young readers apprehend the content more closely, by choosing movies from the 80s till the 2000s will make them relate the movies in a better way than to choose movies from a later decade.

The study was focused on the representation of women in Hindi Cinema and it compared the difference in the portrayal of female characters in the commercial and parallel movies. After the analysis of the movies and further research this study came to the conclusion that commercial cinema is mostly concerned on the male viewpoint and look at things in the same manner as well.
In 1921, Mahatma Gandhi stated, “To me, the female sex is not the weaker sex; it is the nobler of the two: for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge.”

The idea of a traditional woman in the Hindi cinema is more or less based on the same pattern. The mind-set of almost the whole of India agrees to this part that women are meant to make compromises, sacrifices without complaining and this shows our supreme culture where women are the caretakers of a family.

People behave in a particular manner because they are being socialised in that particular way. They have seen their mothers and grandmothers, aunts and sisters who perform household chores all through the day. Even if they are working in the public sphere and used to come home late, it is either they who do the laundry, cooking, and other household chores or there is a maid (again a female) who does all this work to help the woman of the house. In any case, the children will see females doing all the household work.

They are being socialised in this way that they feel it is the duty of a female to work inside the house, no matter if she is working outside the house or not. Whereas, the males are the ones who will remain outside the home for the most part of the day and will earn money to buy things for everyone.

The same socialisation is done by our cinema. The movies show a frail picture of females and a strong and macho image is projected by the males. The image of a pious and shy female is positioned opposite the blatant and bold male. Thus, the children are shown everywhere their positions and are practiced to be that way since childhood.

Movies subtly make its way through the unconscious mind of the audience and without any preaching they programme the brain of the viewers. Whatever the reality may be, it is always exaggerated in the movies and accepted by the audiences.

Women always had the potential to act well on screen and stand tall with their male counterparts. There are cases when their potential is not completely shown to the world in order to boast the patriarchy that has always been omnipotent in our society in each and every sphere of the life. For instance, Madhuri Dixit is a very well-

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1 Quoted in Jayavardena et.al.: 1986: 95
known name in the Hindi film industry. She was considered to be the queen of Bollywood since she had been giving blockbuster hits during the late 80s to the 90s. Still if we look at the roles that she had played in many of her movies, we could see how her male counterpart used to overshadow her hard work.

One of her movies that was taken in chapter four of this thesis that dealt with the film analysis, was *Ram Lakhan* that was directed by a renowned director, Subhash Ghai, and was released in 1989. The movie showed her as a simple village girl who was completely dependent upon her father and after getting involved with Lakhan, she became dependent upon him. Her exploitation in the movie has shown at several places. One of them was the incident when she was been asked to perform in a mansion and was referred to as a prostitute by the host in a degrading and humiliating way. Therefore, her role showed her as a timid and submissive girl who could not stand up for herself.

In contrast to her male lead who was not only smart and cunning but also avenged her father death in a brave manner. Here the two characters were totally different and the male was shown in a superior position to his female lead.

Women subordination is an old age practice, since the patriarchal society came into being this practice can be observed. Male domination over their female counterparts is sometimes not even looked upon as an issue in many places of the world. But still when women continued to be subjugated through generations, they finally decided to raise their voices against such oppression. They wanted to free themselves from the shackles of such bondage. This voice that women raised against female exploitation has been given the name of ‘Feminism’. Feminists simply want to uplift the position of females in this male-dominating society.

Women have always played an important role in the society but they have never given their due respect. Most of the societies are dominated by men and controlled by them. Only in a handful of the progressive societies, women have the decision-making power. This exercise of the decision-making by women was not started in a day; it took a lot of effort and a lot of time. It has been a continuous process to assert the equal rights for women by many women and some men as well. This process wanted to bring about a change in the society and it was termed as ‘Feminism’.
Men have been repressing the female rights for too long when finally some women stood up against the old age customs. Feminism was started for the equality of men and women. It was a movement started for the social, political, and economic equality of everyone. Equality is, basically, a balance between a male and a female with the intention of liberating the individual. Feminism is a human rights movement. It is about proclaiming equal rights for every human being, men or women. It wanted to spread egalitarianism around the globe. The feminist scholars have divided the study of feminism into different waves based on the beliefs and ideologies pursued by the women in a particular time period.

In all these movies that were analysed in this study, different decades produced different kinds of stories. Yet a huge change in the parallel movies can be seen from depicting rural women (*Rudaali*) to urban women (*Monsoon Wedding*), and from the confident village girls (*Mirch Masala*) to the smart new age professional girls (*Phir Milenge*). Still the commercial cinema depicted women in more or less the same light from a dependent and meek girl in *Ram Lakhan* to a shy yet professional girl in *Munna Bhai MBBS*.

If we look into the trajectory of both the genres, we can see how innovative ideas were adapted and acknowledged in the parallel cinema became hugely successful when compared to the new perceptions adapted in the commercial cinema.

While bold female characters are shown in the parallel movies, meek and timid ones are shown in most of the commercial movies. A crude reality can be seen through the representation in the parallel films. The attitude and behaviour of the female characters are much smarter even if they are seen to be villagers. For instance, in *Manthan* (1976), the character of *Bindu* was shown to be a bold one when she scolded *Dr. Rao* after he took a small sample of the milk from her house. She was courageous enough to follow him and then explain the whole matter in front of a crowd of villagers. But when we see the character of *Gehna* in *Virasat* (1997) that was released two decades later, she was portrayed as a shy woman who followed her husband’s words blindly.

Such portrayal clearly shows that parallel cinema was not only bold but also ahead of its time, as some would say, and showed a much realistic picture without pleasing or falsely depicting any character.
As the new millennium barged in, it came with a lot of experiments, innovations, and excitement with it. Those bold movies that were used to make their way through the parallel movies in the 80s and 90s made their way in the commercial cinema in a full-fledged manner. Bold themes and serious storylines were dealt with pleasure in the movies that were meant for the youth that was controlling the box office of our country. More than ever, it was the time when male body also became the object of desire. Females got a chance to engage in voyeurism and they were able to ogle shamelessly.

This was the time when the females stop accepting the orders of the males and start finding the answers for themselves. They have broken the shackles of bondage that were clutching their feet for too long now. They were free from the societal as well as the psychological barriers which were put forth by the patriarchal society to hold them back. Females were free to make their own choices something that they were denied to acquire from the past several centuries under the classical male oriented society.

Clearly it shows the transformation of a traditional saree clad woman who was usually seen doing all the household chores to the modern fashionista classy woman who has an attitude of a devil and a personality of an angel.

Just like the male with their testosterone running through their blood were shown in a negative way in the movies, here females were shown sexually charged in a positive light. Movies were made where such taboo subjects were dealt with precision and creativity, including Amit Saxena’s *Jism* (2003), Abbas-Mustan’s *Aitraaz* (2004), Anurag Basu’s *Murder* (2004), and Siddharth Anand’s *Salaam Namaste* (2005).

The trend for the films have been continuously changing with females gaining equal and sometimes more screen space/time with their male counterparts. It can be the beginning of a new era, a period where even if females are not the rulers, they are also not the slaves of the patriarchal society which have oppressed their free soul and have snipped their wings for too long.