



## GENDER ISSUES IN THEATRE AND CINEMA

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## KEYWORDS :

Movies reflect our tastes and our customs primarily because filmmakers appeal to an audience's desires. On that level, Bollywood has both, reflected reality and addressed issues that are contemporary. The prime focus of this paper is the cinema of the 1990s and to some extent contemporary popular fare, but this elicits a brief look at the preceding decades. At this point, I'd like to document certain predominant concerns that, decade-wise, Indian movies have reflected. Also, Gender is the prism through which these concerns are dispensed. However the documentation is neither conclusive nor exhaustive.

When cinema began in India, it was dominated by primarily mythological and historical themes. This was followed by nationalist themes, reflecting the agenda of nation building. Men and women were shown toiling with equal fervour, shoulder to shoulder against an agrarian, rural backdrop through the 40s decade.

The late 50s introduced the city as the land of opportunity reflecting the social reality of large-scale migration. Questions of morality were interwoven into the narrative, often couched in symbols. The evocatively named women in Raj Kapoor's *Shree 420* are a case in point. While Vidya (Nargis) projects traditional Indian values through her mode of dress and the rituals she performs, Maya (Nadira), apart from the obvious connotations of her name, is also the undesirable western paradigm reflecting both capitalism and corrupting moral and social values through her dress and practice. Despite their residence in the city, Vidya is part of a community reminiscent of the socio-cultural milieu of a village that is unabashedly glorified, while Maya has a more independent status. The hero is allured by the glitz and glamour of city life and strays briefly but is eventually repentant, realizing the value of simple living and high thinking and returns to the village-chawl.

The 1960s are an interesting and significant decade belonging to 'yahoo' star Shammi Kapoor who, in almost all his movies, glorified the macho prototype, popularized by Elvis Presley in the west. He as well as his female counterparts, reflect the influence of the West in their clothing and lifestyle. However, social and cultural values – respect for family elders and obedience to parental authority and the clear divide between virtue and vice – remain intact. In *Teesri Manzil*, for example, Asha Parekh and Helen both wear western style clothes, but while Helen dresses to seduce, Asha's choice serves a more practical purpose. This was clearly the period of the soft romantic genre which perpetuated the romantic stereotype: good looking, cultured, macho man and coy, coquettish, feminine woman.

The Bachchan persona dominates the cinema of the 1970s. He is identified with a primordial anger and populist leadership qualities, and could be said to reflect the awakening and empowerment of the marginalised. However, gender representations and gender relations both are problematic in these films, for the following reasons:

- 1) The heroine is always grudgingly a part of Bachchan's life.
- 2) Either she occupies a sub-liminal position in society herself (Rekha in *Muqaddar ka Sikander*/ Suhaag, Parveen Babi in *Deewar*) or the relationship is itself radical to begin with (Shakti).

- 3) She is either the maternal-nurturer figure (Rakhee in *Trishul*/ *Kala Pathar*) or the uppity wild cat who needs to be tamed (Amrita Singh in *Mard*, Zeenat Aman in *Laawaris*, *Don*).

In short, most Bachchan films projected the romantic angle in a rather by-the-way manner, because the focus was on the angry young man, his angst and unfinished agenda with society rather than his romantic involvements.

The equally popular social family drama of this decade projects a parallel concern. *Ghar Ghar ki Kahani*, *Avtaar* and *San-saar*, to name a few, reinforce gender roles through their portrayal of stereotypes. Saris and flowing locks typify the good bahu while the bad bahus are dressed predictably in western style dress and sport short cropped hair. It is important to note the emphasis on realism – it is the middle-class home, its manners and problems that are explored, but political issues were more pronounced.

The 80s was the decade of the action film, but it also spawned a plethora of avenging and victimized women. *Insaaf Ka Tarazu*, *Pratigat* and *Khoon Bhari Maang* had bloodthirsty women vowing revenge, *Arth* and *Masoom* projected the wronged wife and *Kamla* posited the complex nature of the exploitation of the underdog, interweaving questions of gender, caste and class.

Women characters are stronger, more assertive and the 'bad men' are the victims of their vengeance on the one hand (Kabir Bedi in *Khoon Bhari Maang*) or the silent, strong supporter (Raj Kiran in *Arth*). This decade saw the introduction of the 'sensitive man', a precursor of the metro-sexual man.

The later half of the decade had *Maine Pyaar Kira*, important in my opinion for two reasons. Firstly, it started the trend of 'feel good' films that invaded the 1990s, and secondly, for its unabashed yet implicit propagation of gender stereotypes. For eign returned Prem (Salman Khan) is presented with 'modern' (predictable symbols abound), educated, city-bred young woman, the daughter of his father's business partner as a prospective bride. Enter Suman (Bhagyashree), the quintessential 'Indian girl' who has been raised in the village, as a good daughter to be a good wife. Her evident *sanskars* and *Sanskriti* leave no place for doubt as to who Prem will finally choose. However, one noteworthy change in the gender equation is that the couple establishes a bond of friendship before they venture into a more intimate relationship.

The 1990s perpetuated, with renewed vigour it seems, the traditional stereotypes, through the 'candy floss' family drama genre. The benign yet firm patriarch, the sacrificing mother, the virtuous, righteous male protagonist and the good, Indian young girl on the threshold of marriage, in habit this world. Marriage occupies an important transitional space, in that, a pre-and post-marriage set of values, code of behavior and dress are distinctive. The joint family structure gains unprecedented popularity and even when the nuclear family set up is introduced, the attempt is to re-create with nostalgia, the traditions and rituals of the family home. A classic case in point is Kajol in the more recent *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam*, who awakens her family every morning with the traditional *aarti* despite living in London. Interestingly and significantly

perhaps from a sociological standpoint, it is the women characters who carry forward the bastion of rituals, while the men are depicted in more 'progressive' terms. An almost pseudo-traditionality appears and is celebrated. The appeal of this genre to an NRI audience is both indisputable and under standable, but he point to note is that these movies have been huge box office hits in India as well. Clearly, their appeal is neither limited nor restricted.

I'd like to focus on two movies of this period, to illustrate how notions of gender stereotypes are upheld in the first-*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (HAHK) and how subtle changes are introduced in the latter-*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ).

Both movies were positioned as 'family movies.' Roughly translated, the means that they are for consumption by the family and are about family-related issues. This implies a total absence of vulgarity as well.

The male protagonist in both is playful and teasingly flirtatious, but at a crucial moment displays the extent to which he has internalized Indian morality: Salman Khan in the 'Jute de do' song in HAHK, doesn't twist Dixit's arm to release the shoes and Shah Rukh Khan in DDLJ in the morning after scene, declares passionately that he realizes the value an Indian girl places on her virtue. Notably, this, in both the cases, is the moment the women fall in love with the man.

The female protagonist captures the attention/affection of the hero through her 'womanly' skills-cooking, singing, dancing (HAHK) and her guileless honesty (DDLJ). She is educated, modern and knows her mind. She wears mini skirts and roams Europe unchaperoned but displays respect for parental authority and sings the *aarti* with suitable devotion.

Post the blossoming of romantic love, the couple moves into the arena of impending marriage and maturing sexuality which is reflected in an increasing inhibition-the end of playfulness and an induction into the conjugality, the larger discipline of joint family living. At this point is introduced the conflict between individual desire and dharma or family responsibility, and this is the point of departure between the two movies. That the romantic pair in HAHK are willing to renounce their desire for each other in deference to the wider interest of the joint family as a moral institution also reinforces the stereotype of gender and explains why Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) strays into the kitchen and stays awake to feed Prem (they play-act the perfect Indian couple in a pseudo-marital situation). In DDLJ on the other hand, Simran (Kajol) honours the promise that she had made to her father before he grants her permission for the Europe trip, but only after she has confided in her mother. Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) vows to win over her father rather than renounce his love or elope, in defiance of parental authority. While HAHK upholds the norms of the idealized bourgeois family and conforms unquestioningly, the latter re-negotiates.

At this point, I'd like to offer a perspective on the dynamics of family relations that is being played out. The attempt is to decode the underlying cultural patterns, based on observed reality and seeing a design beneath 'scraps of behaviour.'

Sociologists like Ashish Nandy, Sunil Khilnani and M.N. Srinivasan, seem agreed that at the core of 'Indianness' lies the concept of 'brahminical restraint,' which explains why the penniless school master is revered and celebrated over the successful businessman. Indian society is structured on social rather than economic terms and tradition is seen as one of the pillars of the brahminical structure. The unit of the family is also identified as a more or less homogeneous one that has the ability to withstand all kinds of social storms: urbanization, westernization, industrialization, the liberation of women, all of which have posed a threat to this pillar. Notably, at moments of acute distress, cinematic representations have invariably re-iterated the value of the old order. The strategic projection of stereotypes reveals and is perhaps an unconscious reflection of social reality and underlying power structures.

Mr. Santosh Desai asserts that the family structure had an inbuilt mechanism for self-preservation, because

- a) It was authority driven (the figure of the patriarch).
- b) It favored a defined code of behaviour.
- c) It had clear-cut role models- the dutiful bahu, the unworried widow, the obedient son, the sacrificing mother.

If we juxtapose the precepts of modernism, they posit a palpable threat to the hierarchical system through its emphasis on social equality, individualism as against the community and the need for recognition vs. the desire to fit in. While HAHK re-affirms the brahminical model, DDLJ makes a plea for transition. It projects role models (Amrish Puri) and sustains stereo typical ambitions (Parmeet Sethi), yet, simultaneously interrogates them (Farida Jalal) or projections are ambivalent (Kajol).

The movie reveals quite clearly, that Indian society is no longer driven by a uni-polar value. Yet change is both gradual and continuous towards the emergence of multipolarity. There are continued traditional moorings and no desire whatsoever to jettison the past in the name of modernity. What is upheld is 'soft individualism,' or family-centred individualism, wherein the characters are comfortably bi-cultural and at ease with tradition.

At about the same time were successful women-centred films like *Astitva*, *Aastha* and *Mrityudand*. That are a nuanced exposition of feminist concerns ranging from the belief that women's oppression is a result of the complex articulation of both patriarchy and capitalism to questions relating to female identity and sexuality. Liberated, semi-liberated and feudal men have equal footage in these movies, with the former two winning accolades from the audience. This paved the way perhaps for the contemporary Bollywood fare that seems to state quite un-equivocally that social values and lifestyles are in a state of flux.

Contemporary Bollywood biwis have shed their down marker image and exude oomph—Bipasha Basu in *Jism*, Mallika Sehrawat in *Murder* and Udit Goswami in *Zeher*. Yet, a woman so conscious of the sensuality is a projection of the age-old figure of the temptress. Eve, a stereotype to be avoided at any cost because she poses a real threat to the family cocoon (Priyanka Chopra in *Aitraaz*). The sensuality factor is still fraught with some level of distrust and discomfort. More realistic, urban contemporary women like Urmila in *Bhoot*, Juhi in *Jhankar Beats*, Rimi Sen in *Dhoom* and Rani in *Chalte Chalte* are making a tentative but welcome entry into the world of celluloid, raising the hope that the issues and concerns of 'real' women will be addressed sooner, rather than later by our film makers.

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