



The Changing Role of Women in Hindi Cinema

KEYWORDS

Pratima Mistry

Indian society is very much obsessed with cinema. It is the most appealing and far reaching medium. It can cut across the class and caste boundaries and is accessible to all sections of society. As an art form it embraces both elite and mass. It has a much wider catchment area than literature. There is no exaggeration in saying that the Indian Cinema has a deep impact on the changing scenario of our society in such a way as no other medium could ever achieve.

Literature and cinema, the two art forms, one verbal in form and the other visual, are not merely parallel but interactive, reciprocative and interdependent. A number of literary classics have been made popular by the medium of cinema.

During its awesome journey of 100 years, the Indian Cinema has been a witness to a sea-change in the presentation of the female protagonists. The picture of woman presented by the Hindi Cinema is changing in more than one sense. Women still play the same role as wife, mother, beloved or vamp, but the presentation has changed a lot. With the change of time, women of Hindi Cinema too face new challenges. Directors like Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and Meghna Gulzar are bold enough to depict 'taboo topics' like lesbianism, polygamy and even surrogate motherhood.

The Hindi movies have essentially been male-centric, leaving little space for the women to evolve as an independent character. Traditionally women have been reduced to a mere spectacle in the movies, pretty faces objectified for their beauty. The change is undoubtedly slow. The mainstream cinema show women as glam-dolls whose sole ambition in life is to attract the attention of accomplished males. The examples are not difficult to find- Singham, Dabaang, Gajini, Agneepath etc. The male-centric movies fully exploit women's physical beauty and sensuality. Most of the talented actresses have to work within tighter limits, in smaller and more repetitive roles.

The history of Hindi Cinema presents a woeful picture of discrimination and marginalization of women. However, filmmakers like Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan, Satyajit Ray, Rituparno Ghosh, Basu Bhattacharya, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Hritwik Ghatak, Madhur Bhandarkar and many others have marked an exception with their brilliant presentation of women excelling beyond their roles as wives, mothers or beloveds.

Issues-based films with convincing and often having central female characters are in fact a proud part of the Indian cinema. Iconic directors such as Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal and Hrishikesh Mukherjee exclusively made such films through the 1960s and 1970s, a genre widely hailed as the Indian New Wave or parallel cinema. Today many of the directors making parallel films are women such as Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair, Meghna Gulzar, Nandita Sen and Aparna Sen. Box office success and the associated money continue to elude these directors. Yet their films (Mehta's *Fire*, *Earth*, *Water*, Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* and *Kam-Sutra*, Meghna Gulzar's *Filhaal*, Nandita Sen's *Firaq*, Aparna Sen's *Paroma* and *Mr.*

and *Mrs. Iyer*) are no less than the revered classics of Ray or Benegal.

Women have played a number of roles in Hindi movies: the mythical, the Sati-Savitri, the rebel, the victim and victimizer, the avant-garde and the contemporary. The new woman was always portrayed as a rebel. There are some positive portrayals of rebels in the Hindi movies like *Mirch Masala*, *Damini*, *Pratighat*, *Zakham*, *Zubeida*, *Mritudand* and several others. The definition of an ideal Indian woman is changing in Hindi Cinema, and it has to change in order to suit into a changing society. It has been a long hundred years since Dadasaheb Phalke had to settle for a man to play the heroine in India's first feature film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and women in Hindi cinema have come a long way since then.

Gradually the women have been getting their due. The neglect of women in Hindi movies during the 1960s and 1970s hurt them and they made a back entry through the art cinema in the 70s and the parallel cinema in the 80s. Shabana Azmi was the pioneer of the new woman during these decades who denied to suffer silently and who wanted to be heard. She would not tolerate an unfaithful husband and wouldn't hesitate to leave him, as Shabana Azmi did in *Arth*.

Today's woman is not making a martyrdom of virtues. She wants to be heard, wants to express herself. *Zoya* (a character played by Parineeti Chopra) in *Ishqzaade* does not sit and cry when she is betrayed. She cries foul. That has come a long way from the heroine wanting to commit suicide if the man she loved has ditched her.

The picture of woman presented by the Hindi Cinema is changing in more than one sense. The women play the same role as wife, mother or beloved, but the way of presentation has changed a lot. The modern woman of Indian Cinema would no more tolerate an unfaithful husband (*Arth*) and wouldn't hesitate to leave him.

In 1997 Rani Mukherjee made her debut in the film *Raja ki Ayegi Barat* where her character was raped by Shadab Khan. The court sentenced the rapist to marry the victim. After marriage, the husband makes several attempts to murder her. By the end of the movie the man discovers the goodness of the woman he had raped and tortured and marries her again. Fourteen year later, Mukherjee played *Meera*, a character in *No One Killed Jessica* who asks her lover to 'fly solo' in the mid of their love-making when her job demands to leave immediately.

Shona Mishra of *Luck by Chance* dares to reject her ex-boyfriend who has come to make amends with her after realizing his mistake in dumping her. Shona rather chooses to live alone in her tiny studio acting in TV soap opera.

Silently the image of the woman is changing in popular cinema. They are being projected as real and contemporary women. They are not projected as an ideal sati savitri wife, or an ideal, all sacrificing daughter-in-law. In number of films we

find strong women characters trying to establish an identity of their own, be it as a single mother (Paa), a foul-mouthed journalist (No One Killed Jessica), lady vengeance (Kahaani, Ishqiya), a murderess (Saat Khoon Maaf), a career woman (Fashion, Corporate), a lovesick manipulator (Tanu Weds Manu) or a rebel survivor (That Girl in Yellow Boots). These are the new vamps, the anti-heroines—protagonists whose life does not depend on the presence of a 'hero'. Unwedded mothers are not thrown out of the house and humiliated but were accepted by their families and friends like in *Kya Kehna* (2000), *Salam Namaste* (2005), *Paa* (2009), etc.

The change of images has not been a sudden one. It has been happening slowly. The original vamp was clearly what a good, pious wife or sweetheart would not be; the anti heroine. Right from her birth in silent films through her journey to the talkies, the vamp was the seductress, the Shurpanakha of Hindu mythology trying to seduce the maryada purushotam hero away from his righteous path. In some cases the heroine had what was essentially the vamp's career—a club dancer—but was invariably pure at heart, such as Madhubala as Edna in *Howrah Bridge* (1958). Slowly the heroine too got sexy and was allowed to smoke a cigarette and to wear a bikini, though ranking high on the morality meter.

The heroine of Hindi Cinema has stepped out of her good image and is experimenting with grey. Earlier, the vamp mostly filled up the forbidden space of pleasure, sex, seduction and desire. There was nothing virginal about her, and the same can be said about the heroines of today. Premarital sex, extra-marital relationship, seducing the hero, cheating her man, playing an independent single mother – she does it all. The heroine is no longer playing the conscience of the hero; she is now vying to be the muse of the audience. She is there in the movie not for the hero but for the entertainment of the audience.

The woman is stronger, almost equal to man in some films such as *Dhoom*, *Dhoom-II*, *Shaurya*, *Aitaraaz*, *Saat Khoon Maaf* etc. where there is almost no difference between the heroine and the vamp because all the female stars are willing to step into negative roles if they are strong and can make a lasting impression on the audience. The boundaries between the bad girl and the good girl have been removed or become blurred over the years.

Nishigandha Dasgupta (a character played by Bipasha Basu) in *Madhur Bhandarkar's Corporate* has a shade of negativity in her character. She is a go-getter. She wants to be successful at any cost to wipe out her past bad experience and doesn't mind a bit of industrial snooping on a rival company. She gets caught, of course. But the audience is not left unsympathetic to her predicament.

Women on screen have become bold enough to talk about their sexuality and they can use their sex appeal to get work done. It has become difficult to debate about the exploitation and subordination of women when they have started using bodies for their own advantage.

Mujhe jo chahiye, uska maza sirf raat ko hi aata hai.
Jawani taste karne ke liye hoti hai... waste karne ke liye nahin.

It is hard to believe that the dialogue implying sexual meaning is spoken by a woman, by Vidya Balan in the movie *The Dirty Picture*. There has been a shift in women's sexuality from being objects to subjects. Take for example, Poonam Pandey, a model who shot to limelight when she made the statement to strip for the Indian cricket team if they won the 2011 World Cup. Recently she posted her nude pictures on her twitter account to celebrate Sachin Tendulkar's 100 centuries and Kolkata Knight Rider's victory in IPL. From an unknown struggling model she has become famous overnight with the use of her body and sexuality.

Such women might be considered as *femme fatale* in many cases. Movies like *Jism* (2003), *Aitaraaz* (2004), *Ishqiya* (2010), *Pyaar Ka PUNCHAMA* (2011) and the recent *The Dirty Picture* (2011), all showed how women not only understood their gender and sexuality but also used it to get favours. With changing times, traditional values and beliefs regarding all aspects of our life have changed, and cinema being a cultural variable reflects on these changes too.

On closer scrutiny, however, these modern looking women in Hindi movies are not devoid of traditional Indian values. A female-centric film and a film that is progressive in its portrayal of women are two different things. For example, Priyanka Chopra's character in *Madhur Bhandarkar's* film *Fashion* portrays a woman exercising her sexual freedom who invariably comes to an unhappy end. Vidya Balan played the role of Silk in *The Dirty Picture* who is an independent and spirited woman. Despite these qualities in her, she commits suicide, marriage being her ultimate ambition. Thus many female figures in Hindi movies are presented as superficial symbols of free spiritedness. Alcohol has become the symbol of modernity in films. Today we can see a trend of half Sati Savitri and half modern hybrid women in Hindi Cinema.

Ethical values in Indian society have changed to a large extent and they are reflected in Hindi Cinema where premarital sex, adultery, sexual overtures where the woman takes the initiative are quite common and have also got audience acceptance. Otherwise films like *Astitva*, *Gangster*, *Jism*, *Tanu Weds Manu* etc. would never have clicked the way they have.

The character of mother has got complete makeover in the recent Hindi movies. The Bollywood maa was never allowed any joy. She was a joyless creature, forever weeping, wailing and all-giving and all-forgiving. She was a miserable soul, a seamstress with rheumy eyes, a peasant resisting a lusty landlord, and if she was rich, a devoted wife who couldn't defy her husband. From *Leela Chitnis* and *Sulochana* to *Nimrupa Roy* and *Rakhee*, they couldn't be happy people. The image they provoke in our mind is that of a furrowed forehead, worn sari and drooping shoulders.

From *Mother India* (1957) to *Vicky Donor* (1912), the portrayal of on-screen mothers have undergone a sea change. Watch a sprightly *Ratna Pathak Shah* play a wonderful, everyday mother in *Jane Tu Ya Jane Na*. She teaches a college, reads *Naomi Wolf* with her feet up, wears Indo-Western clothes and admits that she doesn't feel like cooking on an off day. So would the son make some omelets please? She is not a sacrificing mother, nor a superefficient housekeeper. Before her, there was *Kirron Kher*, probably the first mother to be allowed humour, whims and laughter. The mother she played in *Hum Tum* is that of an ambitious Punjabi matron speaking broken English. Her role really introduced a refreshing change.

In *Vicky Donor*, the scene between Dolly and her mother-in-law sharing a drink has become the most talked about act of the film. Dolly is an everyday mother, not a very radical character. It was a family without a father, where the mother is everything. She is progressive. She works and relaxes herself over a drink with her mother-in-law. Shoojit Sircar, the director of the film confesses to have drawn the character of Dolly from his mother who was suffering from insomnia. Sircar suggested her to share a small drink with him that relaxed her and had her sleep soundly. Sircar says the Punjabi ladies on his Face book have sent him thank you messages for liberating them from the Bollywood imposed moral template. "If you hadn't shown women drinking, they would have continued to offer us soft drinks!" That the audience loved the two women in *Vicky Donor* was a sure indication that the audiences have been ready for a real mother for a long time.

In a small ways Bollywood has been experimenting with the mother figure for some time now. *Reema Lagoo* in *Vaastav*,

a fond mother shoots her gangster son at his request, when he realizes that there was no hope for him. That storyline of course reminds us the memorable lead character played by Nargis in Memboob Khan's Mother India. Apart from Ratna Pathak Shah and Kirron Kher, Hema Malini, Dimple Kapadia, Lilette Dubey and many others have completely redefined the character of maa in Hindi Cinema.

However, all the changes in the roles played by women in Hindi Cinema cannot be counted for good. Hindi Cinema began initially with the myth of the ideal Indian woman and this image was thrust upon audience. In the 1950s and 60s the vamp died and some of her qualities came to the heroine. Any heroine, who went down the wrong path, came to a bad end. The woman underwent a further change and could now expose on screen. This was not an expression of freedom or liberation but to draw audiences. Commercialization of movies plays an important role in the portrayal of women. Very few directors regard movie as an art form. For most of them it is a means to collect money and they would go to any extent. Every filmmaker wants his movie to be a part of 100 Crore Club. For that matter they would not mind catering porn in their movies. The directors are not only to blame. The heroines too are eager to earn money and fame in their short career and therefore, are ready to do whatever can be done.

The item number has become an important tool for the directors to drag the audience to the theatres. It is not a new thing in Hindi Cinema, but it has never been given this much of importance before. The word item in street lingo refers to a woman as a sexual object. In an item number the heroine is portrayed employing all her sex appeal. In the original format the item number was performed for the villain or to seduce hero. Today they have become an extra attraction for the audiences to watch movies. The costumes are used more to expose than to cover; the lyrics are becoming more lusty. The icing on the cake is that they are now played by the leading ladies of the industry.

With the changing roles the dressing of women on screen has also changed a lot. The simple sari has come a long way. From Meenakumari dressing up in a sari that covers her entire body, we now have the modern, navel-showing sari worn by Priyanka Chopra where she has a bikini top as a choli in Dostana. Earlier the heroine would dress up for the hero, now she dresses up for the audience.

Hindi movies often implied that girls in western clothes neglect home and do not work hard. The traditional girl was more of a homebody and often not interested in a career. Girls who dress western are often shown to be spoiled. They drive cars rashly, are arrogant and it requires a decent Indian man to come and teach them a lesson. Soon this spoiled brat is tamed by the hero and she becomes obedient. Asha Parekh in Ziddi, Saira Bano in Poorab aur Pashchim are some examples of it.

Bollywood movies started to improve in the last decade or so in this regard. They don't always show girls in western dress as sluts, but the sluts invariably wear western clothes. Even if a heroine wears mini skirt, she often has to prove her Indianness. In Kuch Kuch Hota Hai Rani Mukherjee, a London-returned girl in a micro-mini proves her Indianness by singing a devotional Hindi song. We have moved on since then. For example, in Dhoom (2004) Abhishek's wife (the character played by Rimi Sen) is shown sexy, dressed in skimpy western attire but is hardworking and loving and fortunately for her, she does not have to prove her Indianness by conducting poojas and dressing herself in sari. That was like a fresh air and broke the stereotype.

I would like to conclude my paper with a hope that Hindi Cinema remains honest in portraying women and give them the space they deserve.

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