



REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN RAJKUMAR SANTOSHI'S FILMS

Media

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ABSTRACT

Women are in an unenviable position throughout the globe today and long time since the past. In India, their situation is unique because of the culture and traditions so mired in religion, which is unconditionally dominated by men. Cinema has followed the path in allowing women very less space on screen and off screen though at times, the humanity or reason has shown through and problems of this section of the society have been addressed by the film makers who dared. One amongst them is Raj Kumar Santoshi. Has in his repertoire, many genres and his genius is undoubted. However, his brushstrokes on the film canvas are the strongest in representing women. His women are the women of substance. The present study not only frames the auteur of this director but also studies his select films to know about his representation of women in them.

KEYWORDS

Gender, Patriarchy, Feminism, Representation, Auteurs

Introduction

Women in India have faced a very peculiar situation and have been offered an ambiguous position, where on one hand, they have been venerated as Goddesses and placed on a pedestal as a Mother and on the other hand, they have been degraded to the position subservient to men in all respect and force to live a miserable existence, many times, even worse than animals. Various crimes against them from their birth to their death testify to the truth of this statement and unfortunately, even with increase in literacy and digitalization, these crimes have not decreased. All the arts like paintings, sculpture have many times exploited the female bodies in the name of praising their beauty.

Commoditisation of female body has been in existence from times immemorial and the modern media has only broadened the circle of exploitation. "The ideology of patriarchy works through the concept of female morality setting territorial limits for the whole idea of feminine identity and exposing the hypocrisy of male attitude that ultimately seeks patriarchal domination of women. A female's body remains central to the **societies** as well as her realization of self. Patriarchy, that asserts itself through marriage, adultery and rape, works through the female body. On the other hand a female who tries to resist patriarchy uses her body to express her freedom, desire and sexuality."

(Representation of Women in Hindi Cinema, published March 23, 2015, retrieved from <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/film-studies/representation-of-women-in-hindi-cinema-film-studies-essay.php>)

Cinema came to India from the west. India, though, soon made this technology its own. The representation of women in films followed a very predictable, stereotypical course, with only few flashes of revolt in between. Earlier, when Dada Saheb Phalke, the pioneer of Indian cinema, made Raja Harishchandra in 1913, there was no women, even prostitutes, ready to take on the roles of female characters as it was considered derogatory to act in films. It was Salunke, a waiter who took on such roles or Dada Saheb's daughter, Mandikini. Later, women have made their mark in the film industry as much as men. Actresses like Durga Khote, Devika Rani, Meena Kumari, Madhubala, Geeta Bali, Waheeda Rehman, Hema Malini, Madhuri Dixit, Aishwariya Rai to Alia Bhatt, there is an exhaustive list of name who have given Indian Cinema international acclaim. Films like Mother India have accentuated the status of women. Songs in these films have eulogized her, raised her to the status of Goddesses. Their characters have covered every genre and all scales from white to grey to black.

Women actresses have faced various challenges successfully from casting couch to pay disparity. The portrayal of women in Indian Cinema has been debated for long. It has been seen that women have been depicted in a stereotypical way as a reflection of the society which is largely patriarchal in nature. As mother, sister, beloved, wife and vamp, her personality has been compartmentalized and typecast. However, there have been phases and film makes who have come out

of this groove to put women in bold and prominent positions, at time taking up related themes which are much ahead of their times like in V. Shantaram's *Duniya Na Mane*. These film makers have set new trends for the films and the society to follow. It is through these films that the society has changed its mindset towards women. Raj Kumar Santoshi is one of the directors in contemporary a time, who has taken up cudgels on behalf of the better sex, questioning the society on their behalf and making them victims who do not take things lying down. Rajkumar Santoshi was the son of director P.L. Santoshi and was born in Chennai. He worked as the Assistant Director to Govind Nihlani. His films as a director and producer include Khakee, Andaaz Apna Apna, Legend of Bhagat Singh, Lajja, China Gate etc. The present study endeavours to cover the auteur of Santoshi as far as the representation of women is concerned.

Significance of the study

The issue of women and crimes against her have taken new significance after the Nirbhaya gangrape case. The government in power has had to take many steps and initiatives to counter the skewed sex ratio in many states, especially Punjab and Haryana and also the rising crimes in metros. Media, especially films, has also played an important role in disseminating information on both sides of the problem and has acted as a role model for many. Films are a great motivating force through the depiction of many social ills. Therefore, it is important that such issues be taken up for analysis at this juncture.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are

1. To understand Raj Kumar Santoshi as an auteur.
2. To study his representation of women in his films.
3. To explore the range of representation of women in Santoshi's films.

Research Methodology

The study is the semiotic analysis of select films of Raj Kumar Santoshi with a feminist interpretation.

Review of Literature

Nidhi Shendurnikar Tere (2012) in her study discusses the stereotyping of women in Hindi films, operate as it does under a male gaze. The representation is not progressive enough for a social change. Even the strong women characters end up being victimized and accepting it unconditionally in many films, thereby weakening the impact.

Ruchi Agarwal (2014) in her article opines that since cinema is a reflection of society, there have been changes in the portrayal of women in Bollywood films and the characterization is more detailed and with different shades but the essentials remains the same and conforming to the culture and traditions more or less.

(Ruchi Agarwal, Changing Roles of Women in Indian Cinema, January 2014, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279017811>)

Changing_Roles_of_Women_in_Indian_Cinema)

Discussion and Analysis

Though known for action based films like Ghayal and Ghatak, with heroes like Sunny Deol, Sunil Shetty and Ajay Devgan, and comedies like Andaz Apna Apna with Aamir Khan, Salman Khan. Santoshi has made a few landmark cinematic statements with films like Damini and Lajja which lash out at society for ill treating women. To review the role of women characters in some of his films like:-

Damini-

It is the story of a woman's fight for justice not only for a maid or herself, it is the fight for the dignity and honour of women in general. Damini, played by Meenakshi Sheshadhri, is a truthful middle class girl, who gets married into a rich family. Her honesty comes into play against her own family when her brother in law and his friends rape a maid during holi celebrations. Damini stands by the maid and is therefore, declared insane and tortured by her in laws, both physically and mentally. However, she does not budge from her stand. With the help of an alcoholic lawyer, Govind, she is vindicated when her husband, Shekhar Gupta, speaks the truth on her behalf and vindicates her. Damini is not an aggressive feminist or otherwise ideologically active. She is indeed, portrayed as innocent and naive, who still believes in the strength of relationships. When the lawyer accuses her husband, she stops him. Truth is just second nature to her. She is a strong character, who survives various ordeals like a mental asylum to reach her goal. The film released in 1993 is as relevant today as it was then. The issue of rape of domestic help by rich, spoilt youth is depicted by Santoshi without sugarcoating it. Many of the dialogues of Damini have become iconic. Damini means lighting and the protagonist of the film strikes like lightning on the evil forces arraigned against her. However, Damini is still a lone ranger. She hardly gets any support from other female characters in the film. It is still, the males, her husband and lawyer, who redeem her. But a devoted wife going against her family was a path breaking representation of women in Hindi films.

Lajja-

It almost questions the mythological traditions related to women through the stories of four women whose lives get entwined around each other. The circumstances of each one are different but their basic problems remain the same. Santoshi takes up the issues of female foeticide and infanticide, dowry and sexual crimes all at one go in this movie but women in all four cases remain undefeated. They emerge stronger and victorious. All the women are named after the names of character of Sita from Ramayana, Janaki, Vaidehi, Maithili, Ramdulari. Lajja is the story of Vaidehi, played by Manisha Koirala, who is on run from her impotent, chauvinistic husband for whom she is just a body to produce an heir. On the way, she encounters women caught in situations which they are fighting in their own way and men who stand opposite them in support or to exploit them. As Amaresh Mishra remarks in his article, dated September 10, 2001,

“Santoshi, in fact, provides a cinematic article on the position of women in Indian society. He sticks to some basic stereotypes while trying to introduce the much more liberated Indian rural woman as an unrealised prototype.” (<http://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/lajja/213114>)

Maithili wakes up in time through Vaidehi's intervention to escape from dowry hungry in laws to break her marriage and go with the good hearted petty thief, Raju. Then, there is Janaki, who has to face the wrath of the crowd for her 'blasphemous' remarks against deities, resulting in her miscarriage where her live in partner and mentor sexually use her and are not held accountable at all. Lastly, Vaidehi meets Ramdulari, the woman from the marginalized segment. She is victimized just because of gender and caste discrimination prevalent in the Indian society. Santoshi not only takes up cudgels on behalf of women but raises various pertinent problems, plaguing the society like infanticide, dowry system, rape and other sexual crimes. It was 'blasphemous' use of Ramayana and the name of Sita which makes this film unique. It was courageous of Santoshi to interpret mythology in the feminist way he did. All the female characters have the guts to stand up against traditional stances, dominated by men as they are. Lajja or shame is on the society which treats its women as depicted in the film. Women in other films like Halla Bol or Andaz Apna Apna are not just glamorous props but have a stand of their own and scintillate even in a scene or two like Sneha as the supportive wife of the hero Ashfaq, who yet does not condone the wrongdoings of her husband and keeps on pricking his conscience from time to time, allowing him and escape route to moral redemption. She does not veer away from the path, he does. The vampish, manipulative Aishwarya in Khakee or the love lorn, Anjali, Madhuri Dixit in Pukar are in a different mould altogether. It is in very few Hindi films that the heroines are shown in grey shades. The devil working for Anjali in this case is jealousy. It so overwhelms her that she 'innocently' betrays her love and the nation. However, it is to her credit that she realizes her mistake and is prepared to undo the wrong done even at the cost of her life and also thereby, wins her love. Mahalaxmi, in Khakee, however, also betrays for love but is on the wrong side of the law always and unrepentant. All heroines of Santoshi are well etched out by the director. They have reservoirs of strengths, missing in most of the stereotypical portrayals of women in Indian films. It is seen that many of these women have grey shades. Even Janaki in Lajja, for example, is unapologetic about her drinking and her live in relationship. She lives her life on her own terms. Anjali, in Pukar, becomes a pawn in the hands of people planning to ruin the country and her childhood crush. But she has the guts to admit it and come out of the conspiracy with flying colours. The heroines of Andaz Apna Apna are out to find husbands of their choice. Varsha of Gayal and Gauri of Ghatak, the most action oriented films in Raj Kumar Santoshi's repertoire, also stand by their beleaguered heroes. They are fragile, delicate creatures, physically but have strength of character and mind. They know how to speak their mind.

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Conclusion

The changing ethos of the Indian society in the face of globalization has had some repercussions on the status of women and the terms like feminism have evoked strong feelings across media and on to other public platforms. Filmmakers in India and elsewhere have awakened up to this paradigm shift to some extent, some earlier than others. This category of film makers with a hint of gender sensitization deserve to be studied for their differential treatment of the issue. Raj Kumar Santoshi, as an auteur, has through a batch of strong or well etched out female characters, created a benchmark for feminist study of cinema.