

# Representation of women in Indian cinema: From self-effacement to self-assertion

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## ABSTRACT

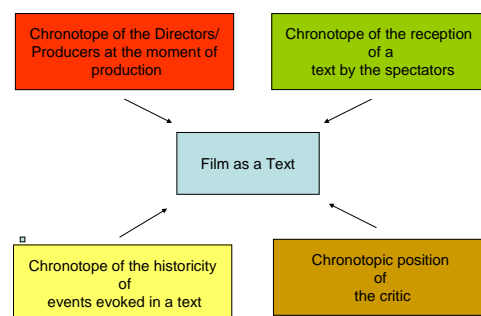
The present paper charts a sweeping analysis of the journey of Indian cinema, prominently Hindi cinema, vis a vis the representation of women from a position of insignificance and effacement to the position of prominence and self-assertion. There is a definite connection between reel life and real life; both engage in a two-way symbiotic interaction. Real empirical lived conditions of existence affect cinematic representations and, conversely, cinematic representations turn out to be instrumental in transforming, liberating and emancipating society. The paper performs an analytical survey of films starting with the first Indian production *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) with no women actors. It goes on to dwell upon passive, submissive, one-dimensional women seen in films like *Dahej* (1950), *Gauri* (1968), *Devi* (1970), *Biwi ho to Aisi* (1988), *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988). Further, the paper elaborates upon freezing her identity in the image of a goddess; the containment of women within the centrality of patriarchal authority, a reference to 1960 release *Mughal-e-Azam*; to strong iconoclastic women who emerge as fighters and survivors within the limited choices available to them as in 1957 release *Aandhi*, apparently based on the life of the first Prime Minister; and finally, to the emergence of strong women undaunted by circumstances, capable of asserting their own individualistic sense of identity.

**Keywords:** Self-effacement, Interpellation, Containment, Passivity, Phallogocentric, Patriarchal, Self-assertion.

## INTRODUCTION

Cinema is meant and believed to entertain, to take the viewer to a world that is starkly different from the real one, a world which provides escape from the daily grind of life. But is it just that? Cinema is a popular means of mass consumption which plays a key role in moulding opinions, constructing images and reinforcing dominant cultural values. Thought-provoking films make us introspect, analyse and connect with the contemporary real life situation. Any work of art, be it film as a text, stands at the Chronotopic interface [1] (time-space intersection) between the point of production of a film which involves the Chronotope of the directors/ producers/ script-writers; the vantage point of the reception of the film which implies the Chronotopic positioning of the spectator, the historicity invoked in the situation or the events portrayed; and the Chronotopic positioning of the critic.

## Interpreting a Film as a Text

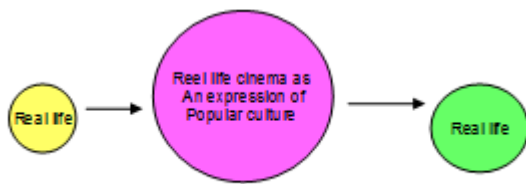


Hence, we have multiple perspectives and interpretations of a film as a text, hardly any one of which can be called absolutely invalid. As such the post-modern paradigm, where we now position ourselves, undercuts all paradigmatic fixities and master-narratives. [2] Texts are open to n- number of interpretations, none of which is invulnerable to re-

reconsideration. Analogically, the undercutting of paradigmatic fixities has given wings to the boundless flight of women's capabilities and multifarious possibilities of their urge for self-expression.

As a film entertains, real life contributes to the ideas, concepts and issues presented in 'reel life', that is, cinema, as a means of popular culture. And further reel life affects real life by moulding opinions, mental and socio-psychological frameworks of people and their sartorial manners. Hence, it is a two way dynamic symbiotic process

## GESTALT OF CINEMA AS A MEANS OF ENTERTAINMENT



A significant take on the films in the present paper is that it is not always necessary for a film to overtly show a complete inversion of conventional gender stereotype. Instead, evocation of questions and issues is in itself a productive exercise.

The history and evolution of the role and representation of women can be understood from the fact that the very first Indian film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) had no female actors. This feature of assumed excrescence of women, their effacement and dispensability from the early cinema formed the hallmark of the beginning of Indian cinema. Sharmila Tagore, veteran bollywood actress, makes crucial comments on gender stereotyping in our society and its replication in cinema. I quote:

Even 65 years after our independence, we find that India's progress towards establishing an equitable society has been slow and disappointing. Discrimination against women thrives and cuts across religion, caste; rich, poor, urban-rural divides. Today, in 2013 and so many legal provisions later, things are arguably better than before; yet certain things remain unchanged. Secure in their solid economic and social foundation, men are men, and we are the other. Today, women realize that unless certain fundamental issues that affect gender equality and justice are addressed, women's empowerment will remain at the level of rhetoric.

(Representation of women in Indian cinema, India international centre, nov 27, 2013)

From the time of Manu, women have been told that they should live by the dictates of men. Most of the advertisements today are bombarded with images reinforcing gender stereotypes: the high-tech speed savvy world of information technology, cars, banking cognitive of intelligence and informative abilities are routinely geared to men. But when it comes to household, self-adornment, cosmetics and care-giving women feature in extravagant glamour. Insurance ads repeatedly appeal to the Indian patriarchal sensibility to save money for a son's education and a daughter's marriage. We are invariably reminded of Lacan's analysis of structuring of language in terms of binaries: light and dark, rational and irrational, intellect and emotion. The first attribute in these binaries is appended to male, while the latter is relegated to the female. Woman is inevitably and invariably relegated to the opprobrious, the marginalised arena of insignificance and inefficacy.

The present analysis of the representation of women in Indian cinema is thematically categorized under the following headings:

- (i) passive, submissive, one-dimensional, victimised women;
- (ii) women marked by containment, captivity, immobility, framed in a static mould;
- (iii) larger than life roles marked by stark idealism;
- (iv) women questioning social norms;
- (v) women of substance representing subversion of female stereotypes: the bold and the beautiful.

Passive, submissive, one-dimensional women can be seen in films like *Dahej* (1950), *Gauri* (1968), *Devi* (1970), *Biwi ho to Aisi* (1988), *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988). This wide temporal spectrum from 1950s to 1980s shows the recurrent and perennial need to fix/ stratify women into the conventional mould to satisfy the patriarchal Indian temperament that all is well; that in spite of the emergent social changes things haven't really changed and that we have succeeded in maintaining the status-quo. In *Dahej*, Prithvi Raj Kapoor, the proud and dignified father of the only daughter, Chanda, marries her to Suraj. What follows is how Chanda's mother-in-law gets agitated over the lack of dowry and starts harassing her. The helpless father decides to sell everything and give it all to the mother-in-law. *Devi* is a film directed by Madhusudan Rao in 1970. The film posters show different themes of the film. One shows the dutiful mother and wife showering all her love and motherly compassion on her child. Another poster shows a man smoking while leering at the dancing girl. Woman is presented at the far receiving end of society, deserving no sense of respect, conveniently dispensable, at the most 'use and throw' object.

These are ideologically conditioned women shown as passive, submissive wives and martyrs for their

families, who refuse to leave their marital homes despite severe physical and emotional torture: the idea being perpetuated by Indian symbols like the 'doli' and the 'arthi', the palanquin and the funeral bier.

Another film by the same title '*Devi*' by Satyajit Ray deserves mention. It is a touching story set in 1960 in rural Bengal. Doyamoyee, the woman (played by Sharmila Tagore) and her husband Umaprasad live with his elder brother and sister in law and the wealthy father-in-law. The husband goes away to study in Calcutta. Father-in-law, the patriarch, is an aging widower. He is a respected landlord and devotee of Kali. The problem arises when the father-in-law has a revelation in a dream that the daughter-in-law is an incarnation of goddess Kali. He emphasizes that she be worshipped. When a dying child is placed at her feet, he is miraculously cured. When her husband hears the news and comes to her rescue, her husband's rationalization falls apart since Doyamoyee starts getting convinced about her divine status. When her nephew falls ill, he is placed in her care. The child dies. This shatters Doyamoyee. The proclaimed goddess becomes insane. As the husband calls her back, she is seen running into a field, maddened by her inefficacy as the goddess figure and vanishing into the mist more like a witch than a goddess. The point is pretty clear. Ingeniously cast into the role of a goddess or a witch, a woman's actions and code of conduct are well-defined and constantly under surveillance. A control of female sexuality, identity and independence requires her to be frozen into the image of a goddess, failing which she is beleaguered by a self-portrayal as a witch. What is threatening and unacceptable to the patriarchal set up is her status as a human being.

In the analysis of containment of women within the centrality of patriarchal authority, a reference to 1960 release *Mughal-e-Azam* is deserves mention. The film stands as one of the historical epitomes of immortal love of Salim and Anarkali. An ambitious, successful Bollywood commercial starring Dilip Kumar, heir to the throne of Delhi, the charismatic Madhubala, the court-dancer and the domineering Prithvi Raj Kapoor, as king Akbar. The historical romance, the spectacular battle scenes, the opulence and grandeur of the Mughal court are all unforgettable. The film ends with the prince's rebellion against his father quelled by the king's gimmick where Salim's life will be spared if Anarkali withdraws from the scene. Anarkali agrees to be entombed alive in a brick wall. Film ends with a tacit hint that the benevolent king let her free through a secret tunnel. Tyranny and overweening authority are camouflaged under the mask of benevolence.

Another discourse of women's subordination involves the containment of woman, effacement of her identity, woman as an extra, an adscititious excrescence, just there in her static captivity/ immobility with no real role to play. She waits for her absent knight in armour to vanquish the enemy at the border (Sunny Deol in the film *Border*) or like Priyanka Chopra in *Agneepath*, only

a romantic partner to Hrithik Roshan who is busy avenging his father's brutal murder. The actress' appearance works simply as a distraction to the viewer from excesses of violence.

Even mainstream popular romantic musical comedies like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Maine Pyar Kiya*, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, *Biwi no. 1*, have male will and discretion directing the plot of the films. Simran in *DDLJ* falls in love with Raj in spite of her mother's warning not to exercise her choice in decisions concerning her personal life. The relationship then depends on either Raj's initiatives or the patriarch father's (Amrish Puri) astounding change of heart when he tells Simran to go and live her life. With hardly any calling or proclaimed ambition or direction in life, the heroines are swayed away by the circumstantial exigencies. In *Biwi No. 1*, the husband has extra-marital affairs in spite of having two kids. Yet he is laboriously won over by the wife and accepted back into the family system unquestioningly. The blame for the husband's errancy is put on Sushmitha Sen, the other woman, who led the poor man astray. Poster shows the happy-go-lucky aberrant men. Salman Khan can be seen as holding the reins of marriage symbolically by holding Karishma Kapoor by the plait. In spite of the great success of such male-centered popular cinema, where women are objects of male gaze with the sole purpose of beautifying the big screen with their glamorous casting, an informed and critical spectator undergoes the experience of Brechtian epic theatre [3]. Brecht endorsed a relaxed audience smoking and thinking critically, detachedly, distancing themselves from the action of the plot, not getting emotionally engulfed by the events. With their critical faculties open, spectator emigrates from the realm of pure entertainment.

Often presentation of gender stereotyping serves the purpose of tacitly inverting and interrogating the fixed notions of male and female roles in society. Women wake up to the concept of their interpellation by the male subject [4] and phallogocentric patriarchal society. The smiling unperturbed face of the female actor while her husband pulls her facetiously by her plait is iconically revolting to female spectatorship and sensitive male constituency as well. The presentation of tacit exploitation and subordination of women makes the impalpable, palpable; the tacit, apparent; the covert, overt. As popular cinema such implied apparatuses serve a dual function. The visual presentation becomes an open text, amenable to varied interpretations. There will be a community of spectators as consumers who, as passive consumers, accept cinema for its apparent literal value. Another set of spectators critically engage with the film as a text and understand it as a text informing and initiating a process of social change and gender equality.

Larger than life idealistic roles of women infest Indian cinema to satisfy the male appetite. We have recurring representations of profoundly elevated and unbesmirched womanhood who can commit no wrong.

Their grievances, desires, feelings, perspectives and ambitions are sacrificed, silenced/ effaced in the service of creation of perfect beauties.

A prominent case in point is Amitabh Bachchan and Jaya Bhaduri starrer *Abhimaan* (1973). It begins with the premise of the wife being more talented than the husband. An old uncle in the film comments that the fact of woman's greater talent is enough to crumble their marriage. Hence, in *Abhimaan* defiance of the stereotype forms the inception of the problematic of husband-wife relationship. The resolution is found only in the conventional re-instatement of the stereotype.

But, there is a set of woman-centered films which raise pertinent questions about women's identity and role in society. It is worth looking at strong iconoclastic women who emerge as fighters and survivors within the limited choices available to them. 1957 release *Aandhi*, apparently based on the life of the first Prime Minister of India, was banned by the government but later premiered on the TV. The point is about the immense strength of a self-made woman and emphasis on a woman's choices. Whether or not correct in her essentialism, to the exclusion of her male counterpart, is a debatable point. But the very fact that she exhibits the freedom to choose and the right to excel was something appreciable. 1993 release, *Damini*, is another example of a woman who resists being ushered into silence by her family and fights a hard struggle to achieve justice for the maid-servant, gang-raped by her brother-in-law and his friends.

Another very significant landmark in the direction of representing a strong woman-centered film is the unforgettable *Mother India* (1957). Let us have a fresh glance at the film and not just relegate it to another idealistic female module. Here is a woman whose family is left in the lurch due to economic crisis and famine and flood conditions. The handicapped husband, Raj Kumar, humiliated by his helplessness deserts the family. Nargis takes over the family responsibility. She fends herself from the animalistic desires of the village Lala and brings up her children with love and self-respect. She is a fighter against all odds. She finally shows courage enough to shoot her own son who is disrespectful towards the Lala's daughter. The film, with the mesmerizing beauty and unmatched boldness of woman at its centre, is a landmark in Hindi cinema.

Contemporary cinema is, of course, a long way ahead in projecting women's problems headlong. No embarrassment, no hesitation, no camouflage either on the part of directors or actors. Shabana Azmi and Vidya Balan have become national icons in their own right. 1996 film *Fire*, directed and written by Deepa Mehta is the first instalment of the elements trilogy. Two women married into arranged marriages find their respective husbands cold and apathetic, emotionally and sexually. Frustrated and disappointed, both find solace and emotional satisfaction in each other. Myself not being in favour of sexual dissidence, the significant point is the

woman's refusal to get silently smothered by claustrophobic circumstances; instead showing courage to create an alternate reality; capacitated to create an ocean of light in the face of beleaguering darkness. Screenings of the film were met with extreme disfavour. The anger seems to be actually directed against the fear of creation of an alternate reality where male control over female identity will become null and void since control of female sexuality is, of course, one of the planks on which patriarchy rests. Vidya Balan in films like *Kahaani* and *Dirty Picture* routs the silences and repressions in which women are supposed to live.

Recent releases like *Queen* (2014) and *Mary Kom* (2014) are women-centred films with no prominent male protagonists. Contemporary cinema has come a long way from the origin of Indian cinema and charted out an appreciable journey to the total emancipation of women from the shackles of male-dominated society and more staunchly patriarchal family system. Kangana Ranaut, in *Queen*, expatiates a new definition of happiness when she impinges on her lonesome journey to her dream-city, London, for her 'honey-moon'. She explores life, faces challenges and realizes that happiness is appended in one's own heart, in the freedom of one's choices. No anger, no bantering, no bitterness. *Queen* overcomes her resentment for patriarchy with an analytical understanding of life and first hand empirical experience of the psychology of the oppressor and the ways of the world. There's an unmitigated de-centring of male ideology and male perspective. The high point of *Mary Kom* comes when her father, antagonistic to her career as boxer, throws a choice at her: "father or boxing". The doting daughter, but not to be daunted by any obstacle in her career, chooses boxing. Mary has complete faith both in her father's love and in her passion for boxing. She knows father will come round once she proves herself in championship. Her firm faith makes her win over her exasperated coach when she seeks his guidance. She expresses her unease at the difficulty of carrying on training with two babies. However, the coach seeing the fire in her eyes, comments: "Don't worry. With two kids we will double the labour". He straps Mary's twin babies at her back and with a rattle of applause in the theatre we witness an iconic figure of an empowered Mary, the mother and the boxer ready to fight the battle. No doubts remain. Can anyone deter this tough woman. Real strength is in the mind and self-assertion of the stalwart woman, not to be daunted, not to be dissuaded, come whatever may. Is it possible to call this woman secondary to man, as 'the second sex', as deriving existence from one of the supernumerary bones of Adam?

## CONCLUSION

Hence, Indian cinema, in the wide range of its multi-faceted spectrum, presents a fascinating range of women characters. The portrayals are poised by the demands of commercial cinema; expectations of the spectatorship; sometimes fulfilled, at other times disappointed deliberately to open fresh perspectives to

the complacency inherent in the status quo and various other factors. But we are definitely thankful to the film industry for enlivening our lives and imagination with vivacious portraits of stringently conventional women characters marked by self-effacement in the face of patriarchal supremacy; not so conventional women; those resisting conventional stereotypes; and those brazenly subversive of gender stereotyping and societal repressions; and those emphatically asserting their rights and respectful position in society. This myriad kaleidoscopic spectrum enables a process of self-interrogation to rectify what is wrong in our society. As women and men, as human beings, we have all the role models in front of us. It is for us to pick and choose and rectify the erroneous, the gloomy, the iniquitous facets of gender stereotypes.

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## End Notes

1. M.M.Bakhtin used the term purport the configurations of time and space to understand the connotations and denotations of language and literature. Here, we take understand a film as a trans-creation of culture and visual literature, capable of standing the critic's analyses.
2. Jean Francois Lyotard in his book *The Post- Modern Condition* replaces grand, universal narratives with local, micro narratives the point was about discrediting over-arching, all-encompassing knowledge systems and a shift towards co-habitation of diverse perspectives and little narratives, which enables multiplicity of diverse, yet equally legitimate stand points. Such a non-reductive, emancipative position enabled feminist discourse with freedom of choice, speech and perspective.
3. Epic theatre, a non-illusory, thought-provoking theatre, was pioneered by Piscator, while Bertolt Brecht perfected it. It employed alienation effect through devices like placards, banners, and slide projections to create a theatre that targeted thought over emotion. The purpose for such a change was social upheaval resulting from a socialist revolution.
4. Louis Althusser in an essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" explains how it becomes important to ensure subjection of the masses to the ruling ideology, to be steeped in and engulfed by ideology to perform their tasks contentedly without a palpable insinuation of their exploitation by the ruling ideology. Such a strategy of the ruling institutions is called interpellation of the human subject. Interpellation camouflages exploitation under the deceptive garb of beneficence.