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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CINEMA AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: EXPLORING THE SYNERGY

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ABSTRACT

Mass Media since its advent has been a catalyst for social change. It has been the voice of the voiceless, marginalised and those at the periphery of developmental process. Women who constitute half the population of the world have been one such group who have been at the receiving end. Traditionally, they didn't have same level of freedom of choices and access to opportunities as men due to various socio-cultural factors. But with the growth of media a change in the mindset has been observed. The aim of this paper is to try and explore the synergy between cinema and women empowerment. The objective is to understand the evolution in the representation of the issues of women in India through the lens of cinema and how it has acted as a tool of empowerment for women. In terms of methodology the paper uses empirical observation, content analysis method and secondary literature to explore the intended aim.

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INTRODUCTION

Bollywood cinema is popular not just in India but globally. Tharoor (2007) notes that Bollywood has helped in the promotion of soft power of India, "by bringing its brand of glitzy entertainment not just to the Indian diaspora in the United States and United Kingdom but to the screens of Syrians and Senegalese- who may not understand the Hindi dialogue but catch the spirit of the films". Cinema is the prime means of entertainment for crores of people in India. It is the most popular form of Mass Media. Owing to this it is made across several languages. Almost, every Friday some new movies are released in India. The impact of cinema can be understood from the fact that the whole politics in the Southern state of Tamilnadu has been revolving around cinema for last few decades now. CN Annadurai, M.G Ramachandran, M. Karunanidhi, J. Jayalalithaa all of them were related to cinema. Film critic Theodore Baskaran (2013) observes "the fan clubs, well organised and spread all over Tamil Nadu in thousands often acted as surrogate party outfits and facilitated the process of the politicisation of cinema. At times, these clubs were used as springboards to launch actors into political careers." Cinema provides not just entertainment to the masses but also enlightens them about various socio-cultural issues.

The images shown and the messages conveyed can have tremendous impact over masses. It is powerful medium in the sense that it captures our imagination so much that audiences cannot differentiate between reel and real. It can influence the dressing sense, food habits, lifestyle, decisions and most importantly our behaviour. If a new style of clothes is worn by the actor in the movie the very second day it becomes cool amongst the youngsters to copy that style. It can shape opinions and thinking pattern of individuals. This is the reason why cinema actors are in high demand for brand endorsements as they have huge public appeal. It is the mirror of the society. If one wants to understand any culture, society, its norms, values, culture, clothing, food habits there can be no better medium than its cinema. Cinema of any period gives the glimpse of that time. It observes and reflects the realities.

Cinema as a powerful form of Mass Media: Bollywood in its journey of more than hundred years has produced movies of all kinds and themes. When it comes to women then cinema has depicted them in various ways. Movies have been made on various issues concerning women such as the problem of dowry, intercaste marriage, female foeticide, domestic violence, skewed gender ratio, unequal access to opportunities, their everyday struggles, harassment at workplace, choices they make and their dilemmas etc. The images of women on screen have changed with the changing times. Some examples below would try to analyse the changes in their portrayal. The decade of 1950s is called as the Golden era of Hindi Cinema.

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Women characters of this time were played mostly by Nargis (Mother India, Aawara, Shree 420, Barsaat, Andaz), Madhubala (Mughal-e Azam, Tarana, Amar, Mr.&Mrs 55), Meena Kumari (Baiju Bawra, Pakeezah, Saheb Bibiaur Gulam) and Waheeda Rehman (Pyasa, KagazkePhool, Guide, TeesriKasam). The movie AhootKanyawhich was made in 1936 dealt with the issue of untouchability. In the film although Ashok Kumar (Brahmin) and DevikaRani(Dalit) are in love but their castes don't suit the caste arithmetic of the society. It becomes the barrier between two. Movie captures the caste nuances prevalent in the society which continue to exist till date where people are not allowed to marry someone of their choice. It is mostly women who must give up their choices and submit in the name of honour and traditions. The infamous honour killings and the diktats by KhapPanchayats which continue till date are a chilling reminder of this horror. Movie Sujata(1959) by Bimal Roy starring Nutan and Sunil Dutt is again based on the same theme.

Mother India(1957) is considered one of the classic movies of Bollywood. Dave Kehr(2002) in The New York Times writes about the movie as such "Its central character is a peasant woman, Radha (Nargis), whose determination to weather all forms of social and personal adversity without compromising her honour becomes a symbol of India's own pride as an ancient culture and a new democracy." It further adds "heroine making sacrifice after sacrifice on behalf of her family" and thus hailed as Mother India. The movie typically shoes all the woes India of that time was facing. Poverty, burdened with high debt, fraud of local money lenders, natural calamities and vagaries, the actual rural life and its value systems. Nargis was hailed as an epitome of sacrifice in the movie but the hardships that she has to undergo in her life is something to be thought upon.

The next movie is Saraswatichandra(1968) with Nutan and Manish in lead roles is another example of how a woman is never free to take the decisions of her life and thus leads a life of continuous suffering. 14 years later the movie PremRog(1982) directed by Raj Kapoor tries to propagate the notion of widows remarriage which was not possible in earlier example. It shows how slow society changes its mentality. Do BighaZamin(1953) by Bimal Roy which has film stars BalrajSahni and Nirupa Roy in lead roles paints a very realistic picture of the kind of marginalisation landless people face. It shows what ordeals they go into in their everyday lives specially the womenfolk. The hand to mouth condition due to poverty, beggar labour, exploitation is further aggravated by the power structure existing in society in which a few have control over law, resources etc. thus giving birth to deep inequality. Another movie very much on the similar note is Ankur (1974) by ShyamBenegal. In the movie ShabanaAzmi who is a landless daily labourer is sexually assaulted by the rich and powerful landlord. She is helpless. All due to the existing feudal power structure, misuse of social position and clout. Nishant (1975), Manthan(1976), Bhumika(1977), Mandi (1983) by ShyamBenegal have ShabanaAzmi and SmitaPatil in lead roles and deal with casteism, class hierarchy, poverty and sexual exploitation. In PurabaurPaschim (1970) lead actor Manoj Kumar goes to London for higher studies. He encounters a new culture over there. He lives in a family where he meets Preeti (SairaBanu). The girl with long blonde hair who wears mini-dresses, smokes and drinks. Movie talks about the virtues of India but the mindset that if a girl wears western clothes means her character is not good is a bit awkward.

She can't be a suitable match for the family. It continues till date when diktats are issued to women as to what they should wear. Their dress is held responsible for the growing rape cases. Movies based on rural life and countryside were very common as most of the population was living in the villages. Rural culture, traditions, festivals, values would be depicted in the movies of the time. Joint family was considered good. Females leads could be observed in the characters of aadarshbahu, beti, bahan, maa. Women actors would mostly wear Sarees and subscribing to western ways of life, dressing was something mocked. at. Women are engaged more into domestic affairs. They must subscribe to the traditions. They are family's honour. No individual choices. Thus arrange marriages are the norm. Independent decision making is rarely visible.

Bollywood Cinema Post LPG reforms until now (1991-2020): Indian cinema truly turned global after the LPG reforms of 1991. The budget, investments made increased manifold. Number of international studios opened their production houses. Movies could now be screened globally. The reach of Bollywood amplified. Thus, in order to cater to the new audiences, we find a change in the content of movies. Now the stories had to resonate with global audiences. Thus, a new woman was born on the screen which was more confident of herself. She was more in control of her life, career and decisions. Movies of this era challenged patriarchy directly. Women are independent, ambitious and they can be seen in every role. Be it corporate world or defence. They are leaders, role models and inspirations for the society. They try to balance between home and job living by her own rules in the urban areas of Mumbai and Delhi etc. They can decide whom and when to marry. For example, NeerjaBhanot, is a flight attendant in Pan Am Flight 73. The plane is hijacked by terrorists. She dies trying to help save 359 of the 379 passengers and crew on board. The movie released in 2016 and the role was played by SonamKapur. Movie is based on the real life story of NeerjaBhanot who was posthumously awarded Ashok Chakra(highest peacetime gallantry award) for her courageous act. This was the portrayal of a very brave lady on the screen. A role model for the society. This is the new woman on screen. Fearless, confident of herself and her identity.

In the similar vein, the movie Mary Kom(2014) is based on the real life and struggle of famous boxer and Olympic champion M C MaryKom. Played by Priyanka Chopra the movie shows what are the challenges which come in her journey, the ups and downs and how she made it so big despite coming from an insurgency hit town. This biopic is an inspiration for all and specially women. One more movie worth mention here would be Dangal (2016) which is based on the life of Phogat sisters Geeta and Babitawho brought laurels to India in wrestling. This is how cinema empowers by creating role models to emulate. Similarly, the movie Mission Mangal (2019) depicts the contribution women are making in the development of science and technology in the society. It beautifully picturises the lives of the women scientists who were involved in India's first interplanetary expedition i.e. launch of Mangalyaan. While on one hand we as a nation have reached the horizons of Mars on the other we are struggling to get our toilets built in every house something which is very very basic to human life and dignity. The movie Toilet: EkPrem Katha (2017) talks about it. Bhumi Pednekar who plays Jaya files for divorce due to unavailability of toilet in her husband's house.

Women mostly in rural and interior areas have to face this matter of shame on a daily basis. It also leads to the cases of rape and sexual harassment. A very important social message has been conveyed through the movie. Pink(2016) talks about the women's rights and their dignity. It throws light on the crimes against women taking place mostly in metro cities. It also talks about consent. A very famous dialogue from the movie is 'No' means 'No'. A man cannot force her to do anything against her will. The movie is very close to No One Killed Jessica(2011) which was based on Jessica Lall murder case. In this movie Rani Mukherjee plays a TV news reporter who follows every detail of the case to ensure that Jessica gets justice. Both these movies Pink and No One Killed Jessica point finger towards our flawed judicial system which seems quite dysfunctional in dealing with the cases of crimes against women. The legal system has so many loopholes that the culprit if powerful can easily commit the crime and still roam around freely. For example, on 16 December, 2012 a woman was brutally gang raped in South Delhi. The Nirbhaya Case created a turmoil in the country. The conscience of the nation was shaken but the judiciary has taken a long time since then to punish the culprits.

Movie Piku (2015) with Deepika Padukone in the lead role is the story of an urban woman who tries to balance between her professional life and taking care of his aging father. In a society where sons are preferred as it is assumed that it is they who would act as the support system of parents in the old age this film deconstructs that traditional idea. Why can't women take care of parents is the question it raises. In movie Chhapaak (2020) once again Deepika played the challenging role of an acid attack survivor. What are the ordeals they have to go through in the society has been shown in the movie? Why do these incidents take place in a civilised society? How does society react to the girls who have to suffer this trauma? The movie released recently Thappad (2020) with Tapsee Pannu in the lead role focuses on the issue of domestic violence against women. In the trailer of the movie one line became quite famous "He hit her, and he cannot". According to the digital edition of news website of The Print, Ananya Bhardwaj on 10th January 2020 quotes the latest data released by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for 2018 which lists domestic violence against women as the top gender-related crime. This shows how serious this issue is. The women who face domestic violence on a daily basis suffer through mental trauma which is unimaginable. Women need to know their legal rights and take a stand against this boldly and not just go on accepting it and making it a part of their lives.

Conclusion

Thus, we find that the subjects, stories and the depiction of women in Bollywood in contemporary times has been changing for good. They are providing more space to women. Depiction of a strong and independent women is quite commonly visible on screen. Gender roles are getting reversed. But is it class specific? Is it inclusive? Does it represent all the women? Where are rural, tribal, marginalised women? The women who work in the farms, women working as labourers, doing household chores and menial jobs, working at low wages in factories, living in slums and in poor inhospitable conditions, single mothers, dependent women, old age women etc. How often their issues gets prominence in Cinema is the question to ask.

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