

Roles of women in hindi films media essay



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Bollywood, the second largest film industry is widely known for its form of creative art. It is a form of art with the ability to entertain, educate, and reflect and shape our sense of who we are and our understanding of the society in which we live. In Hindi films there exists the hero and heroine, however gender hierarchy can be seen and importance is imposed on the male actor. One would agree that the Hindi film industry is male-centric, with limited space for females to be versatile in the character they play. The roles played by the heroine are almost replicated by the same guidelines seen within the Indian society. The Indian society is an influence to Bollywood and is what shapes and defines the roles played by females in films. It has been quoted “ if the image [of women in the cinema] is submissive or secondary, it is the society who is responsible for it . . . filmmakers, keeping in mind the commercial aspect of films, simply highlight what exists” 1. The portrayal of women in Hindi films has been stable in correspondence to the norms and values contained in the Indian society.

India is known to be a hierarchal society, whether it is religion, northern or southern Indian, all groups of people are ranked according to various qualities. Within gender hierarchy, men outrank women of the same or similar age, and senior relatives outrank junior relatives². This same concept is taken into the Hindi film industry where more emphasis is created on the male actor. From the beginning of the film process importance is on the male. For example within the internal aspects of film processing the second step is acquisition of leading male role and then followed by female acquisitions³. None the less, females are a priority in films; however their

portrayals in films are steady and follow certain guidelines according to the roles played.

Indian society has many norms and values, one being the role played by an individual in the society. In Indian society the dominant forms of how women are seen are either as the nurturing mother, innocent wife, the vamp, or the educated modern woman. One or more forms of these roles are always portrayed in Hindi films. With these roles come specific characteristics that are viewed in the society which are then followed and expressed in Hindi films. For example it is considered ideal for a woman in Indian society to have characteristics that include, passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional and resilient⁴. These are the traits that are then brought into the film which not only reflect culture, but also shape culture.

India is a religiously complex society with dominance in the complex religion of Hinduism. In traditional Indian society there were definite and essential norms of behaviour that were usually passed down from previous generations. For example Sita, from the Hindu mythology of Ramayana was seen as ideal woman and ideal wife as she was unwaveringly loyal to her husband and obeys his wishes unquestionably⁵. Hindi films have achieved this ideal of wife's self devotion. The Indian society is known to be restricted to strict rules and regulations which are to be followed by women. The moral of the Indian society states no independence in women and that she should always be under the guidance of another significant male. For example a female in childhood is subjected to her father, in youth to her husband and after to her children. This interpretation of females can be seen in the film

Mother India directed by Mehboob Khan. This film reveals the ideal characteristics of a mother played by Nargis. At the beginning of the movie it is seen that she plays the typical role of a female who is married in an Indian traditional manner. The song “ Pi Ke Ghar Aaj Pyari Dulhaniya Chali” is a significant one with the line that states that it is a woman's fate to leave home. This applies to the traditional moral of the female being passed on from the authority of the father to her husband who now she must be committed to. This is seen in the character. Dharma referring “ self-subsistence or a universal law or norm, which applies at the moral, the ritual and social level⁶. This is another religious and mythological aspect that is inflicted upon women. This is also portrayed in the film through and expressed in the song “ Duniya Men Hum Aaye Hain”. Here the lyrics in the song express that the only honour that a woman has in her life is a woman's dharma. In context of the movie it states that a woman may overcome her struggles but with the conditions that are still expected with the role of a mother. After her husband leaving her she still has hope that he will return and keeps faith and raises her children on her own sacrificing everything she has. This shows the over stress on the love for husband and the duties she has as a mother. It can be seen that in any case, in Indian society the first priority of females is to always keep in mind the norms and values placed on them as females. One may argue that these norms and values have changed within the Indian society with the progression of modernization. However, the lifestyle may have changed in roles of mothers, but the beliefs of the values and norms still exist. For example Kal Ho Na Ho directed by Nikhil Advani is a film set in New York with a modern setting. The role played by Jaya Bachchan shows similar characteristics of a mother which were portrayed by Nargis in Mother

India. Jaya Bachchan, also a widowed female in the film experiences many difficulties due to her husband committing suicide. Even though the true reasoning behind the suicide is known by her, the blame is turned towards her by her mother-in-law. However, this does not stop her from being loyal to her husband as she stayed widowed and to the challenge to raise her children and show her devotedness to her husband. Throughout the film we see that she still supports her husband when people including her daughter talk negatively about him. Here she is also in the struggle of raising her children up on her own and sacrifices all she has to raise them and keep them happy. In both *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Mother India* the role of the mother can be seen to be dedicated with the qualities of self sacrifice, devotion, and religious beliefs.

If not seen as a traditional woman with traditional values, in Hindi films the female is then portrayed as the vamp or modernized women. Bollywood shows both the traditional and modernity of females, yet tends to portray the modern as immoral and favour the traditional aspects. The vamp is usually portrayed as morally dishonoured person and associated with everything that is disagreeable about the west⁷. Again this is due to the norms and values seen in the Indian society. In this case women are seen as decorative objects and used for entertainment. Courtesan is another common role played by women which is attended for an arousing effect upon men. These types of roles are usually associated with protagonist character. The female is seen modern and revealing clothes and becomes an object of male desire. In many films with picturization of this role of female is usually seen to be glamorous and captures the female's beauty in a sensual manner. An

example of this is seen in the movie Sholay directed by Ramesh Sippy in the song “ Mehbooba Mehbooba”. Here the female dancer appears very different from the other female lead roles. She is there for entertainment and to add glamour. Her clothes are revealing and she is used for the pleasure of the antagonist. A similar but slightly different scene is also seen in “ Kal Ho Na Ho” with the song “ It’s the time to disco”. The difference in this song is that the lead female is in the song but is portrayed with a different characteristic that is not the usual in her role. Here Naina (Preity Zinta) is raised in New York but is a casual girl. In this particular scene the audience sees that her attire is modernized, but not revealing. However, in the song a different perspective of her is seen when she gets drunk. Her clothes become more revealing and her actions are different. This is intended to show how a female may act when they go outside of their boundaries of the Indian society and the consequence of it. Jaswinder (Lilette Dubby) in the movie is would be seen as the vamp in the movie as her clothes are trendy and she is flirty around men. Not only are women who aren’t seen in traditional clothes seen as vamps, but also those who don’t obey traditional rules. These would include those who are adventurous, independent and have values different from the norms. Thus, women commonly in Hindi films are either the modernized seductive role or the sophisticated tradition Indian women.

There are many women in the Bombay film industry. Many have reacted with different opinions on how females are being portrayed. For example quoted from Ayesha Jhulka, an actress: “ You have to accept the fact that it’s a male-dominated industry. And you have to accept that basically heroes are given much more importance than the heroine...So it’s better to accept it

and then carry on. You have your own place which nobody else can take. What you can do, the heroes probably can't do" 8. Another opinion quoted by the actress Shabana Azmi: " The one thing that hasn't changed only superficially I think, is in its portrayal of women...I think it's a waste if you don't offer them and give them roles that are on par with their hero...I think that would be very interesting, and basically do films that are pro-women" 8. Lastly. Actress Ritha Bhaduri states: " At the moment I think character roles have more to say than the female heroine, actress...There are very few films that are women-oriented, or have a women dominating the whole thing" 8. From these opinions of several actresses it can be concluded that many actresses are aware of the stereotypical roles given to women in Hindi films. They do feel that there isn't much importance given to their roles, but also know that a film without a complementing female role would not do very well in the box office. Even though the roles of females are driven by the aspects in the Indian society, actresses have continued to accept the roles and play them according. As stated previously the main cause for this orientation is due to what takes place in the society. As the Indian society makes different progression a change in female roles in Hindi films will also be seen.

In conclusion, the female roles played in Hindi film are very restricted and do not have space for variety. Either they are seen as objects to add glamour and entertainment to the film or they are portrayed with important roles such as mothers but with general Indian societal values that come with that role. The Indian society has a main impact on the portrayal of women in Indian cinema. The Indian society has been shaping the role of women in Hindi films

Endnotes:

1 Boot, Gregory D. " Making a Woman from a Tawaif: Courtesans as Heros in Hinidi Cinema." New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies, 2007: 3 (<http://www.nzasia.org>).

2 James Heitzman, Robert L. Worden. India Country Studies. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, 1995: 235.

3 Class lecture (Vishwanathan 2010)

4 Pattanayak, Saswat. Women journalists in Hindi Films: <http://saswat.com/articles/bollywomen.htm>.

5 Chap. 5 Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change, by Wimal Dissanayake K. Moti Gokulsing, 79. Trentham Books, 2004.

6 Chap. 6 Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change, by Wimal Dissanayake K. Moti Gokulsing, 39-44. Trentham Books, 2004.

7 Wimal Dissanayake. 79. 2004

8 In Bollywood a guide book to popular Hindi cinema , by Tejaswini Ganti. 187-192: Routledge