

# Role of femininity in film



Throughout this essay I will be examining the role of femininity in Hollywood film and world cinema in particular Bollywood, I will also assess female stereotypes within film and how they differ throughout the years especially from the 1930's such as films like 'Gone With the Wind' to the 1980's with films such as 'Terminator'. In addition I will demonstrate that there are also different racial stereotypes of women in film and the femininity of black women in film differs from white women. In order to understand and examine this topic it is beneficial to review the current research on how women are analysed through film we must look at the male gaze which is a concept used for analysing visual culture.

One of the leading theories attributed to gender stereotypes within film is the 'male gaze'. "The male gaze is a term coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. Mulvey's theory the male gaze was influenced by Sigmund Freud." (Cook, 2008) Freud was a psychologist that developed theory "that humans have an unconscious in which sexual and aggressive impulses are in perpetual conflict for supremacy with the defences against them". (BBC, 2014) According to Mulvey the "male gaze is both voyeuristic and fetishistic. Her concept illustrated that women were merely shown on screen in classic Hollywood" (Cook, 2008) (classic Hollywood is a style of Hollywood film between 1910 and 1960's) in order to supply men with visual pleasure. Mulvey explored how the psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism and voyeurism can be used to explain how visual pleasure is generated.

Narcissism means a love of self (Soanes and Stevenson, 2003) and voyeurism is a visual pleasure that arises from looking at others in a sexualised way (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004). Mulvey argues that there are

two types of visual pleasure. “ In most Hollywood films the narcissistic pleasure of identification usually involves identifying with the male characters, the ones who are active and aggressive. On the other hand, the voyeuristic pleasures created by cinema primarily involve looking at the female characters on screen.” (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004) “ Thus, classical Hollywood cinema targets a majority of its films at a supposed male heterosexual audience member, making individuals outside this group adjust to a male point of view that is ‘ the male gaze’.” (Cook, 2008)

Claire Johnston, was also a feminist film theoretician like Mulvey. Johnston is known for her research on the construction of ideology in mainstream cinema. In her scholarly works, she also discusses the male gaze. She agreed with Mulvey that the camera sees women as an extension of a male vision; she also assessed stereotypes within Hollywood film using a semiotic analysis. Her semiotic point of view was based on Roland Barthe’s notion of myth, Barthe’s notion of myth meant, that dominate ideologies become naturalised that means the most dominant cultural, historical values and beliefs are made to seem normal and common-sense. (Barthe’s, 2013)

Johnston “ investigated the ‘ myth’ of women in classic cinema. The sign ‘ woman’ can be analysed as a code or convention. It represents the ideological meaning that ‘ woman’ has for men. In relation to herself she means nothing.” (Cook, 2008) John Berger a prominent art critic assessed Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze in his book, ‘ Ways of Seeing’ (1972). He states that ‘ men act and women appear’. Berger agreed with Mulvey that because the viewer was mostly male the appearance of women in film was intended to attract a male’s attention.

However criticisms against Mulvey's theory the male gaze, have been that of film theorist E. Ann Kaplan who theories were based around feminist film ideology. In Kaplan book ' Women in film (1983) she asked " Is the gaze male?" Both Kaplan as well as film theorist Kaja Silverman" argued that " the man was not always in control and the woman is not always passive" (Chandler 2000). Feminist writer Teresa de Lauretis (1987) concluded the female viewer does not simply take up a male point of view, " but works always; in a double identification with the active and passive subject positions". (Chandler 2000).

Journalist Steve Neale also assessed the male gaze theory and his conclusion was that the gaze in Hollywood films is not primarily male, but primarily heterosexual. Both Neale as well as film theorist Richard Dyer concluded that the male characters within film have the capacity to be objectified as well. The man would not always be the spectator, who had rule over the gaze. (Litosseliti and Sunderland, 2002) It is important to note that within Hollywood film since the 1980s, there has been an increasing objectification of the male body in film. (Evans & Gamman, 1995). For example in the film *Thelma and Louise* (1991) Brad Pitt's character, who is a male, is objectified in every shot of him, this shows that the male spectator was not prioritised but the female spectator was.

When analysing femininity in film it is important to discuss stereotypes of women portrayed on screen and also the social context that they live in. One of the most notable stereotypes concerning black woman and Hollywood film is the ' Mammy' caricature taken from the film ' *Gone with the wind*' (1939) played by Hattie McDaniel. Critical studies writer Todd Boyd (2008) states, <https://assignbuster.com/role-of-femininity-in-film/>

The 'Mammy' stereotype is a domestic servant who is often, fat, docile, unattractive, happy-go-lucky, and loyal to the white family. In addition sociologist David Pilgrim (2000) states although sometimes she may have children she was completely desexualized. She belonged to the white master and his family plus she had no black companions. To further illustrate what Boyd (2008) has stated, the 'Mammy' caricature was a symbol during slavery, as 'supposed' proof that black women were contented, even happy, as slaves. Attributes of the 'mammy' such as her broad smile, her chuckles, and devoted servitude to the white family; were presented as confirmation of the believed humanity of Trans-Atlantic slavery.

The Mammy caricature can be seen in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939). If we were to analyse the character Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, we would see that she is a faithful to the white family who she serves; to such an extreme length, that she internalised white southern values and norms. For example she encourages Scarlett O'Hara who she serves as a "house slave", to eat before she goes to a party, or else at the party she would be eating ravenously instead of "like a bird": which is what a young southern belle is meant to do. Mammy's devotion for the white family is reaffirmed when she states at the birth of Scarlett's daughter, "this is a proud day for me I've helped delivered three generations of baby girls for this family". She also shows her disdain for other black people and calls them 'no good'.

However a new stereotype of black women emerged in the 1970's. This era bore a new genre of film known as 'blaxploitation'. Blaxploitation is an ethnic sub genre of exploitation films which were made for black audiences.

With this new genre came a new stereotype the superwoman image. The superwoman image portrays black woman as the action heroines of their neighbourhoods ready to defend family and community by any means necessary. “ The super woman image portrayed black woman as strong and invincible. This image sent out that black women could endure and overcome all odds.” (Boyd, 2008) Actress Pam Grier was an icon of the superwoman image.

Never-the-less in Hollywood films, white women have been stereotyped differently to black women in film and their femininity was portrayed in different ways. Such as in the 1930s and 1940s many white female actresses were stereotyped into melodrama roles on screen. In melodrama films of the 30's and 40's the female was the main protagonist in the film. Also the plot lines in a melodramatic role often consisted of the main female character having to sacrifice her career for love, or vice versa. This typical plotline and stereotype can be seen in the film ‘ Lady in the Dark’ (1944). The leading character Liza Elliot played by actress Ginger Rogers she is a powerful and unmarried fashion magazine executive, she undergoes psychoanalyse as she is having strange dreams that bother her so much that she can no longer make up her mind. She is later cured and is therefore free to stop trying to be ‘ like a man’ and settle in to her rightful role as a wife and sell her business to her fiancé. Anthropologist blogger K. Smith Pullman (2008) stated, that typical the melodrama plot line, “ showed women that if they want to both work and have love, that it was not entirely possible”. (Pullman, 2008) Moreover in the 1950's femininity was displayed in Hollywood film in the 1950's in a different way, “ when women were shown as blatantly sexual

and seductive threats, such as Lana Turner or Ava Gardner, or on the other end of the spectrum as innocent and wholesome, like Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly. Marilyn Monroe slightly bridged this gap, as she was often depicted as both seductive and innocent.” (Pullman, 2008) However femininity in film has not always fit into those stereotypes and from the 1980s a new type of femininity was displayed in Hollywood film this was the androgynous woman this example can be demonstrated in the character Sarah Connor in the film ‘ The Terminator’ (1984) “ These are supposed to be the “ strong” women, showing viewers that women cannot be both strong and sexual, without posing a threat.” (Pullman, 2008)

Also, notably the genres in which women are stereotyped significantly are horror films. According to Adam Rockoff (2002), “ One of the most continuing images of horror films is that of the good-looking heroine screaming with fear- as the killer hastily approaches.” The heroine of the film is often dubbed the ‘ final girl’. The final girl was coined by film theorist Carol Clover.

Brewer (2009) states:

In the beginning of the film, filmmakers habitually depict the final girl as visibly tough, resourceful, and determined. Despite the fact she often finds her friends or relatives dead. The final girl manages to survive in the end of the film, normally following a final struggle with the killer... Many scholars and feminist film critics have discussed the overt masculinity of the final girl.

Carol Clover author of ‘ Men, Women, and Chainsaws’ says that, “ TheFinal Girl, is on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is

<https://assignbuster.com/role-of-femininity-in-film/>

feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terms and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structure of male competence and sexuality” (Rockoff, 2002, p. 13). “ According to Weaver and Tamborini (1996), traditional gender-role stereotypes also exist throughout horror films” (Brewer, 2009). For example, the male characters are shown acting violently and are more likely to attack the killer. Nevertheless female characters are more prone to run away from the killer. “ Female characters in horror films are also depicted expressing fear and panic on screen longer than the male protagonists. Modern horror films of the 1990s till present often depict male characters as jokes or helpless bystanders”. (Brewer, 2009)

When assessing femininity in film it is also important to look at world cinema. Portrayals of women in Bollywood films share a link with ideals about women in Indian society. “ In traditional Indian society, the lives of women were severely restricted. Women’s roles were essentially as a daughter wife and mother.” (Gokulsing and Dissanayanke, 1998) In Bollywood films the ideal wife character must be “ sexually pure and the epitome of sexually fidelity”. (Gokulsing and Dissanayanke, 1998) As Richards (1995: p. 3) states, that Bollywood films upholds the “ traditional patriarchal views of society consistent with the cultural norms pertaining to the status of women in Indian society.” The opposite role of the wife is the ‘ vamp’, “ normally a decadent modern woman, generally with a name like Rosie or Mary” (Gokulsing and Dissanayanke, 1998). Gokulsing and Dissanayanke (1998) states that the vamp normally defies tradition and strives to imitate western



women. “ She drinks, she smokes, visit night clubs and is quick to fall in and out of love. She is portrayed as a morally degraded person and has come to be associated with everything unwholesome about the west. And she is always punished for her unacceptable behaviour.” (Gokulsing and Dissanayanke, 1998) As Dwyer and Patel (2002) commented, In Bollywood, men are depicted in many varied roles; women are almost always depicted in traditional feminine roles. For example, in numerous Bollywood films starring Akshay Kumar and Katrina Kaif, the female star always represents “ the damsel in distress”, while, the actor is continuously shown to be a “ ladies man”.

To conclude, femininity in film is very complex if we assess Mulvey’s point of view women in film are there only to supply men with visual pleasure this could be seen a lot through film in the 1950’s with Hollywood actresses such as Ava Gardner and Marilyn Manroe but over the years women in film have been shown in a variety of situations not just the blatant sex object such as the role of Sarah Connor in the film ‘ Terminator’ which was androgynous and took on male cinematic characteristics. Also when assessing world cinema we see that the more patriarchal a society is the more women are stereotyped on screen this can be seen through Bollywood. Also throughout the horror genre in Hollywood film femininity is displayed through ‘ the final girl’ which many film scholars have stated the final girl is has overtly masculine characteristics although she is aesthetically beautiful.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Barthes, R., 2013. *Mythologies: The Complete Edition, in a New Translation. New York: Hill & Wang***

BBC, 2014. *Sigmund Freud* [Online], Available from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/freud\\_sigmund.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/freud_sigmund.shtml) [Accessed: 30/09/2014]

BENSHOFF, H. and S. GRIFFIN, 2004. *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and*

*Sexuality at the Movies*. Victoria: Blackwell Publishing

Berger, J. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books.

Boyd, T., 2008. *The Mammy Image.*” In *African Americans and Popular Culture*.

Connecticut: Praeger

Cook, P. 2008 *The Cinema Book. London: BFI Publishing*

Brewer, C. 2009. *THE STEREOTYPIC PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN SLASHER FILMS: THEN VERSUS NOW* [online] Available from: [http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-04092009-105427/unrestricted/Brewer\\_thesis.pdf](http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-04092009-105427/unrestricted/Brewer_thesis.pdf). pdf [Accessed 11/10/2014]

Chandler, D., (2000) *Notes on the Gaze* [online] Available from: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/gaze/gaze09.html> [Accessed 30/09/2014]

De Lauretis, T., 1987. *Essays on theory, film and fiction* Bloomington: Indiana University Press

<https://assignbuster.com/role-of-femininity-in-film/>

Dwyer, R., and Patel, D., 2002. *Cinema India: The visual culture of Hindi Film*, London: Reaktion Books.

Evans, C., & Lorraine G., 1995: *The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing*. In Burston, Paul & Colin Richardson (Eds.): *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay*

*Men and Popular Culture* . London: Routledge, pp. 13-56.

Gokulsing, K., M., and Dissanayanke, W., 1998 . *Indian Popular Cinema: A narrative of Cultural Cinema* , London: Trentham Books.

Johnston, C., 1991. *Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema*. In: Thornham, S., (ed ) 1999. *Feminism Film Theory A reader*. New York: New York University Press

Kaplan, E., A., 1983. *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, New York: Methuen Publishing

King, T., 2007. Does film criticism affect box office earnings? Evidence from movies released in the U. S. in 2003. *Journal of Cultural Economics* , 31, 171-186.

Litosseliti, L. and Sunderland, J. (eds.) 2002. *Gender Identity and Discourse Analysis:*

*Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture* . Amsterdam: John Benjamins \_

Pilgrim, D., 2000 *The Mammy Caricature [online]* Available from: <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies/>[Accessed: 30/09/2014]

Pullman, K. (2008) [online] Available from: <http://ksmith-hollywoodwomen.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/stereotypical-roles-of-women-in-films.html>[Accessed 30/09/2014]

Richard, C., 1996. *Hooray for Bollywood, Time Magazine* [online] Available from: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,985129,00.html?internalid=atm100>[Accessed 30/09/2014]

Rockoff, A. (2002). *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986* .

North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc.

Soanes, C. and Stevenson, A., 2013. *Oxford Dictionary of English, Revised Edition* , Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Weaver, J. B., & Tamborini, R. (1996). *Horror films: Current research on audience*

*preferences and reactions* . New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.