

FEMINIST FILM THEORY AND BOLYWOOD MOVIES: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Feminist film theory that emerged especially in the last half of 20th century was a direct outcome of feminism and its related areas of women studies. The feminist thinkers tried to show the age old negation of women in society and culture. The feminist film theorists, taking cue from their works tried to show this negation in cinematic explorations also, which as a social medium cannot deny the impact of society. On the other hand the theories of Freud, Lacan and Marx have their significant contribution in the formation of feminist film theory with the thinkers like Laura Mulvey, Barbara Creed, Tania Modleski etc. They not only analyse the dominant film theory of the time but have also their own philosophy in the field that changes the structure of discourse in feminist film theory in the recent years. The present essay thus aims to look back at the feminist film theory and the role played by Hindi cinema in its context with the representation of women in Bolywood or Hindi movies.

Keywords: feminist, film, theories, women, culture, bolywood.

Feminism is a social phenomenon that had immense impact on the development and emergence of feminist film theory which was the direct outcome of second wave feminism. It is also related with the consequential upsurge of women studies in related academic fields. Feminist scholars tried to analyze and explain the women contexts and characters in movies, taking cues from the feminism and feminist theory. The primary concerns of these critics were to place women characters, contexts and narratives in the broader context of sociology with the concern of women in the specific context. The early influential books, written by Americans like Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (1973), Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies* (1974) etc., explore the role of women, analyzing it in the broader contexts of history and society. They further strive to analyze and explain their respective roles with the degrees of activity they were assigned on screen and also the screen space, they were allotted to perform their tasks. On the other hand English film thinkers were necessarily linking their theories with the broader perspectives drawn from diverse acknowledged theories like psychoanalysis, semiotics, Marxism etc., and gradually

this trend happens to be the dominant motif in the film critics' study circle. Feminist thinkers and writers gradually shift their attention to understand and posit the dominant and omnipresent patriarchal imagery playing its role in the context of these theories in film. These explorations have sufficiently helped in explaining the ways by which the sexual difference is automatically juxtaposed in the classical film narratives and in the way Freudian and lacanian psychoanalysis theory have helped them to reach into a specific formulation for feminist film theory.

The emergence of feminist film theory in the past years is a substantial part of the film studies that has been studied and clarified in such journal such as *Camera Obscura*, *Screen* etc. They specifically combined and present an approach with the clear assertion of semiotics, modernist theories, psychoanalysis of Lacan and Althusserian Marxism. They held the view that the human being are processed and characterized through significant biological, sociological and psychological approaches. On the other hand, feminist film critics such as Laura Mulvey in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey 1975) clearly asserted that men and women are differently picturised and presented through cinematic culture, man as the agents who actually drive the film's narration while women becomes the centre of male gaze, attention and desire. The essay is undoubtedly a founding document of feminist film theory that focused on a generalized picture of cinematic representation as a symbolic medium that cultivates its spectators as bourgeois subjects. Critics and scholars on feminist film theory generally credit the basic parameters laid down by Mulvey. It is also a fact that theory has usually been a problem in feminism. The feminist thinkers question relentlessly patriarchal theories. Jane Flax in her book *Women Do Theory*, describes patriarchal theory as something 'territorial' that is used to proof a form of dominance. Feminist film theory often seems to be coming to a universal outlook that engages complex language which denies women's enjoying experiences in seeing film and even read movies with a critical frame of mind. Carolyn Korsmeyer opines that the aesthetics of feminism engages an emotional response to art medium that is varied from the traditional ones and from the moot point of feminist film theory.

Mulvey uses the theory of psychoanalysis to demonstrate the attraction of cinema. It is based on the desire to see, the notion of scopophilia that Freud opines as a fundamental drive. Mulvey further integrates her theory by combining voyeurism and narcissism into the context of viewing cinema. Voyeurism descends from looking into the characters as our object, whereas narcissism is derived from the notion of self identity with the characters on screen. She has further specified this approach in connection with classical cinema as a structure that works in context with the binary opposition of activity and passivity. According to her this dichotomic opposition is gendered where the male characters are being established as active and female are placed into the territory of passivity. Female being the object of desire for the active males and thus the medium of cinema has further established the western aesthetic of male dominated universe again in its exploration of characters with their intent structures. The film narrative optimizes the male gaze on the female characters and the spectators of the cinema are prepared and urged to identify themselves with that gaze as their view is constricted according to the motion of camera that dutifully follows and portrays that gaze. Mulvey relates narcissistic visual pleasure with Lacan's psychological concept of mirror stage and formation of ego. It is the same way like a child who seeks to identify himself with the mirror image and constructs his ego in view of this image. The spectators likewise derive pleasure by identifying themselves with the image in the screen. The basic concept of Mulvey's theory thus depends heavily on the view that this cinematic identification is constructed in the line of difference of sex. Thus the cinematic presentation of more perfect and more able ideal ego of the male constructs a very powerful

binary opposition with the passivity and distortion in the powerless female characters, presented in the films. Naomi Scheman on the other hand, seeks to posit a more different form of female subjectivity in films and points out to Foucault's notion and opines that dominant modes of specularity are quite complex and they do not substantially offer to define woman as only the seers or the seen.

Claire Johnston was one of the first critics to portray a influential criticism from the semiotic points of view. She strives to put light on the classical cinema's notion of ideologically imaged women. Based on Barthes' exploration of myth, she integrates the myth of women in cinematic exploration. She further opines that the structure of women is what the men reserved for them. It is merely the presentation of men, and women as non-men that represents the vital force of her argument. The focused point of attention is that cinema is not being understood as a medium of representing reality but rather a form or partial view of reality, something echoing Plato's theory of mimesis. On the other hand the specific portrayal of women as dictated by these films made an alternative choice almost automatic by the way they strive to represent the partial real as only real.

Significantly also the modern trends of feminists, working in film studies, are related to sociology or culture studies like the gender oppression, question of race, class etc. with the parameter of feminist film studies. Ann Fergusson, Thomas Wartenberg etc., are some of the thinkers in this field, who have presented valuable thoughts in the area. Wartenberg draws on the example of *White Palace* (1990), a Hollywood film to show that the film presents a stereotyped exploration of the older divorced woman and romanticizes the working class. Tania Modleski in her influential essay 'Three men and Baby M' (1991) points out the contemporary social and legal issues permeating in the cinematic medium. The alternatives to the psychoanalytic approach of film theory thus examines the questions about the portrayal of women in film in relation of their different contexts of self, identity and cultural surroundings, thus opening up a newer vista on the subject of female construction in cinematic medium by placing them also in relation to the context beside the periphery of gender. This undoubtedly put a newer dimension in the field of film studies that was rather unexplored.

As a matter of fact the film studies in the 1970 was relatively new and Mulvey's essay quickly attracts the critical attention due to it and ascends to the status of a classic in the field. In her later works, Mulvey herself has praised and acknowledged the other pioneering works in the field like the works of de Lauretis, Silverman, Barbara Creed, Marry Ann Doane, E. Ann Kaplan, Tania modleski etc.

Hindi cinema has been a major part of Indian culture focusing and representing the society through its changes which has its relevancy in not only India but also in different parts of the world where people enjoy Hindi movies. It has been acting as a mirror of the Indian society. The term bollywood with its obvious reference to Hollywood suggests the hindi film industry. The basic theme of portrayal of women in bollywood movies have been two binary oppositions. It is divided into either the representation of Madonna like figure or a vampire. This portrayal of women into the specific binary opposition made their presence or representation on the screen rather flat and one dimensional. Commenting on the role of Indian women in Hindi movies Jyotika Viridi comments very specifically "In the nineteenth century a model of "Indian Womanhood" was created in the popular imagination in response to colonial rules, and jettisoning it has been difficult. Art, literature, drama and poetry amalgamated to mold a popular vision of Indian womanhood, but the version of the "new" woman was actually the modernists' reinvention of the traditional Indian womanhood tempered by the mix of dominant Victorian and

upper caste brahminical values. The Indian woman in popular hindi cinema is very much the product of this victorian-brahminical axis, especially during the first two decades of independent India" (Virdi 62-63). They are rather submissive, passive, victimized or glorified. As a result, there is notable absence of their direct self voice in the cinematic exploration in bollywood movies. Critics have also pointed out at the uses of songs in this context that are used in films with a particular purpose to portray the ideal women. The ideal women in this context is also particularly submissive. It is a very notable point of the films of 1960s and 1970s that ideal women are almost always was being colored as submissive, very much dependent on the male for her existence and activities. In the films like *Khandan* (1965), the song *tumhi mere mandir, tumhi mere puja, tumhi devta ho*, etc., this can be traslated as you are only my temple, my only worship is you, you are the sole god to me etc. The song *Aap ki nazroo ne samjha* (Anpadh 1962) literally can be translated as the glances of you have thought me worthy of your love and *Tu kabhi mere khuda, mujse bezaar na ho*, may you never be angry to me, my lord etc. These songs very specifically focus the role played by women in the hindi movies and the fact is that they remain fully conforming the values and tradition of Indian society and the values based on the time of the movies.

Thus the picturisation of women in hindi movies is nothing but the re-portrayal of Indian society because it is the fact that if the image of women in cinema is submissive or secondary, it is the society who is responsible for it and the film makers, keeping in mind the commercial aspect of films, simply highlight what exists in the actual world. Indian film like the hegemonic hindu society also follows Manu's dictum that the women should be governed in their childhood by thier father, as a wife by her husband and in the old age by son. Mehboob Khan in his 'Mother India' (1957) singly follows this dictum revealing the ideal characteristic of a mother. After her husband's leaving, she still hopes for his return and raises her children, sacrificing everything. Nikhil Advani's *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003) also shows the similar characteristics although presented in a modern context. One of the dominant discourses in hindi cinema is its conscious portrayal of its gender with the axis of knowledge and power dimension. Women becomes the selfless objects or dummies only reassuring men's control over them. Further emphasis is given on women as objects and the lack of cohesive narration marks the so-called female dominated story and the exceptions are really very few. Women characters in context with the male protagonist marks the female characters' central feature. The women characters are limited to idealized beautiful women, lover/bad women etc., while the opposite male protagonist may range from his subjective individual role to broader contexts like struggling against society, fighting for justice, agonized in separation or taking personal revenge. However notably in Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* (1975) there is a very extraordinary effort to come to an understanding of the dichotomy. There we see the role of Radha, played by Jaya Bachhan who is a widow is supposed to be an ideal Indian woman and who is not supposed to be attracted by other males. But even then she feels the attraction of Jay, the role played by Amitabh, who is a petty thief and appears in the Ramgarh to be the rescuer of the villagers from the band of dacoits led by Gabbar Singh. But the demand of society of the negation of female urge is after all established by the death of Jay at the end of movie at the hands of dacoits. The death here is not only the demand of the reality of the movie but also the demand of Indian culture for which a woman is left without any further consolation. The connotative name Radha of the woman character here also significantly attests the tradition bound Indian culture. Sharmila Tagore, the veteran film actress, speaking on the subject entitled 'Representation of Women in Indian Cinema and Beyond' at the 19th justice Sunanda Bhandare Memorial Lecture comments that though there is opportunity for the aging heroes romancing

with women just out of their teens and scripts are still being written for such elder actors like Amitabh Bachhan and Naseeruddin Shah, the case is not true for an aging actress. The comment virtually holds the basic picture of hindi movies and this is not only the case of a aging actress but it remains the fact that in most of the films the female characters are just reduced to Barbie dolls or item numbers.

Though the purpose of the essay is nowhere to justify or claim that hindi movie was and is always a male dominated cinematic exploration, there were exceptions and it is really exceptions. The films like Mehboob Khan's 'Mother India' or some of the out of main stream films and recent films like 'The Dirty Picture' (2011), based on the biography of a south Indian actress Silk Smitha, noted for her erotic roles in films, *Kahani* (2012), directed by Sujoy Ghosh, where a pregnant woman is in search of her missing husband, can be stated as examples. The films are in the line of mainstream women centric movies and in both the movies the female protagonist roles are played by Vidya Balan. Serious efforts were also made in Deepa Mehta's controversial films like *Fire* (1996), *Water* (2005) etc., but it is not be denied that these exceptions are very few and cannot be called anything as a rule.

We should conclude the essay by taking into consideration Teresa de Lauretis comments where she very aptly points out that the tension between 'woman as representation' on the one hand and 'women as historical beings, subjects or real relations' on the other, is sustained by a contradiction in culture and thus women are 'at once within and without representation'. Perhaps this is not more true than hindi cinema in its relation and presentation of women.

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