

Changing Roles of Women in Indian Cinema

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Abstract: The representation of women in Indian cinema and TV advertisements has evolved significantly, reflecting broader societal changes and the enduring influence of cultural norms. This paper examines the shifting portrayal of women, emphasizing their roles in art, cinema, and advertisements. Historically, women in art were depicted with exaggerated physical features symbolizing fertility, while in cinema, they transitioned from passive, decorative objects to central figures with significant narratives, as seen in movies like "Mother India" and "Raazi." Despite these advancements, many films still perpetuate stereotypes, portraying women in limited roles that reinforce patriarchal values. Similarly, advertisements often depict women in domestic or decorative roles, reinforcing traditional gender norms. However, there is a growing trend towards more empowering and diverse representations. This study highlights the need for continued progress in accurately and respectfully portraying women in media, recognizing their impact on societal attitudes and behaviors. By critically analyzing the current state of female representation in Indian cinema and advertisements, this paper underscores the importance of media in shaping and reflecting cultural perceptions of gender roles.

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Introduction: Cinema is a medium of entertainment. Indian cinema also portrayed various women characters that were powerful enough to inspire the whole society. We see now Bollywood become more sensitive towards burning issues especially about empowerment of women. Women empowerment is a hot topic in India and Indian cinema is also buying into that trends. In Bollywood female actresses played numerous memorable roles in previous decades too. There are so many examples of heroines that showed women empowerment such as Nargis Dutt, the most leading star of 1950s, who played the role of a working lady such as a lawyer in *Awara*, a school teacher in *Shree 420*, and she played her most memorable role as a helpless farmer in *Mother India*. Arts is a diverse range of human activities in creating visual, auditory or performing artifacts expressing the author's or artist's imaginative, conceptual ideas, or technical skill, intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power. Art form has a strong role to play in portraying women. In painting the physical features/reproductive organs of the women were usually exaggerated because it was believed doing so would bring fertility. Women portrayal in painting opens up a quite different perspective of looking at women. Art through its development has

seen the depiction of women differently. It is interesting to get a closer look at the representation of the women and the female body in art other the ages because it informs us on women status in society, how they were seen and what they are valued for over the ages. Whitney Chadwick's *Women, Art, and Society* offers an extensive historical analysis of women's representation in visual arts, exploring how cultural, social, and political contexts have influenced the portrayal of women from ancient times to the modern era. Chadwick's work examines the roles and images of women created by male and female artists, providing insights into how these depictions reflect and reinforce societal attitudes towards gender. Very early art tended to represent women with lots of curves as a powerful symbol of fertility. The *Venus of Willendorf* is a famous example from the Paleolithic, one of many similar curvy little statues. There are many ways to look at this representation: Is the woman elevated to the statue of goddess as being a powerful and spiritual force of nature or is she basically just a womb, two big breasts without a face, feet and tiny arms, basically a baby making factory? Another theory is that this is a self-portrait made by a pregnant woman artist, who could not see her feet. Starting from the middle age, women often tend to be

represented in a very polarized way i.e. as either good or bad, saint or sinner, idealized or erotic, respectable or fallen. Before the XIX century, most art was religious, and Mary offered an idealized and impossible vision of the woman, the mother that is still a virgin. Another representation of the good woman later on would be women at home in the role of the mother, spending time with their family or tending to household chores. Then the bad woman in art are witches and courtesans, women who work in bars or cabarets, women who drink. They are countless examples of that in art, and in particular with impressionist and post-impressionist artists. The first depictions of the female nude in art are religious and often on the theme of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, in a lush vegetation. This was actually very challenging for artists until the renaissance as there was not yet an established tradition of working with nudes in atelier and learning the basics of human anatomy. Then women have been represented outside of a religious context but until recent times, the majority of artists have been male, and the majority of life models have been female. So, the female nude has often been sexualized or objectified to some degree, as well as idealized. The female nudes tend to conform to the ideal of beauty of their time in the representation of men in terms of age and physical appearance than in the representation of women. In the typical reclining nude, the women represented as a passive and very soft object of desire for the male gaze, just waiting there, like a book on a shelf.

History Of Women's Representation in Bollywood

In the early 1900s, women were usually forbidden to act in films and plays. So much that the very first heroine of Indian cinema was also performed by a man. The father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke, gave Anna Sulanke, a male actor, the female part of Taramati in the first-ever Indian film, Raja Harishchandra (1913). However, later on, Dadasaheb found not just one but two female actresses for his second film, Mohini Bhasmasur. He found a single mother Durgabai Kamat and her daughter Kamlabai Gokhale. While Durgabai created history by becoming the first female actress in Indian cinema, her daughter became the first female child artist in the industry. Durgabai's first-ever movie role and the first female role played by a woman. As a widow and single mother, Durgabai was looked down upon, and irrespective of that she decided to become an actor. She took this decision even though she was promptly disowned by her Brahmin community. She had a living to earn for her daughter and joined a travelling

theatre company, because of which her daughter and she lived a nomadic life. Little did she know that she was not only creating history but also paving the way for so many women in Indian cinema. Hindi cinema, one of the most vital parts of the Indian film industry as a whole, has always been a replica of the misery that women faced in real life. It became the breeding ground for stereotypical notions of 'gendering' and misrepresenting women's personalities. Reducing them to mere 'objects' satisfying either the hero's lust or holding the moral responsibility to fix their broken self. The scripts, mostly written by men, portray women as either 'suitable bride' or 'vamp'. The latter is mostly judged by the writer and spectator's gaze throughout the movie's plot, either for being independent or for making bold sexual choices in her life.

These problematic portrayals are often sanctioned through religion and mythology-based plots and references in the films. Films based on such plots portray women as the epitome of obedience and chastity, as pure as the holy river 'Ganga'. Apart from religion, nationalism also led the rhetoric in Hindi cinema specially during the pre-independence period. Films like *Aurat* by producers like Mehboob Khan, followed by *Mother India* 1956 portrayed women such as 'Radha'. The epitome of a 'morally righteous woman' ordained as Mother of the Indian nation, till date idolised by the audience. This "ideal Bharatiya naari" (ideal Indian woman) persona slowly started the compartmentalization of women's role in the popular culture of Hindi cinema. Simultaneously, confining them to either the domestic spaces as 'Sanskari bahu' (Cultured Daughter-in laws), *abla naari* dutiful mothers, and as 'modern' woman, who was judged and villainized throughout the movie as a 'vamp' like 'Maya' in *Shri 420* and others. Take any Nirupama Roy role and you will find the heroine worshipping her husband like God as if that is the sole purpose of her life. They are depicted as if they hold no aspirations of their own. Even if they do then the hero becomes the 'messiah', liberating them from their misery. Bollywood has this history of depicting women as Sati-Savitris with immensely sacrificial love for lovers, and children, especially sons.

Changing Image of Female in Indian Cinema Period 1913-1980:

In early days, Indian cinema focused on mythological stories and great epics. The first feature film, *Raja Harishchandra* was a mythological story. Then during the freedom struggle period, Indian cinema became a medium to voice anger and demand independence

from British Colonial rule. After independence, Indian cinema took-up social issues and problems and focused to portray a society that was not only desirable but also achievable. Period 1950s to late 1970s can be considered as the golden era of Bollywood films. In this time films focused on our rich culture, rural sector, family and friendly relationships, customs, norms and ethics. The issues of poverty were also highlighted. The beauty lied in easy identification of audiences with on the screen characters. The women discharged important role in the films. They held a lot of responsibility on their shoulders to sell the films in the market. Women were given an equally dominant role in the films along with the male actors. Some prominent films of this era viz., Kaagaz Ke Phool, Mother India, Pakeezah, Half Ticket, and Padosan can be cited as example. To illustrate let us discuss the film "Mother India" made in 1957 by director Mehboob. He attempts to combine socialistic ideals with the traditional values. The film Mother India opens with Radha as an old woman being asked to inaugurate a new canal constructed through her village. The men presiding over the function are dressed simple, and refer to Radha as the mother of the village. They refuse to let anyone but her inaugurate the canal. The film begins with an opening note that Radha is a survivor woman and will lead in the new period of prosperity and development. The film shows the importance of being a woman. The term Bharat Mata (Mother India) is a part of the Indian consciousness. A song in the film proclaims that the woman's fate is to leave parental home after marriage. The lyrics of its songs are very intense. A lyric of the film goes on to state that only "laaj is a woman's dharma". Radha is portrayed as a common woman as an ideal wife and a daughter-in-law. She has a divine for her husband. She is very responsible and intelligent. Women watching this film easily identify with her and the men look at her non-sexually, and identify her as their own wives or mothers.

Bollywood Heroines in the 1980s

Action era in Bollywood films began in 1980s. It brought big changes. The Bollywood heroines lost their strength and space to the hero. She was reduced to a glamorous component of the films. She danced around trees, kidnapped, raped or killed. An example of action role of women in the Indian cinema is a film, "Mirch Masala" directed by Ketan Mehta in 1989. It is a story of Sonbai (Smita Patil) working in a chili factory in the western part of preindependence India. Her husband gets a job in the railways and leaves for the city. In the meantime the Subedar (or

tax collector) arrives to collect taxes. He gets attracted to Sonbai, and calls village headman, (Mukhi), to bring her to him. But by mistake he brings a wrong woman. The next day Sonbai happened to pass by the Subedar's camp where she was suddenly grabbed by the Subedar. She somehow frees herself and runs into the chilli factory where she works. An old Muslim watchman Abu Miyan (Om Puri) The ill treated Mukhi's wife, the Mukhiani, comes to the rescue of Sonbai after learning that her husband has allied with the Subedar to handover Sonbai to him. Mukhiani's protest is ridiculed by the Subedar and his hunchmen. They reach the factory, kill the watchman and break open the factory doors. In the final scene the Subedar approaches Sonbai when suddenly the other women in the factory throw bags of chili powder on his face. This film shows women in glamorous characters, like women dancing and the lustful Subedar looking at them. In another scene the Subedar looks at Sonbai through a telescope. In the recent history of cinema the female body became a prime element for the success of an actress. Their curvaceous bodies speak of the time they are spending in gym for work outs. As an example, the leading lady of the 1980's, Sri Devi, is known as „thunder thighs“. Sri Devi, like other female stars, spends hours in the make-up room to portray the aggressive, dominating characters. In "Himmatwala", she out-danced and out-fought the men. She dealt with the villains herself, and defeated them. In "Joshila" (1989) even two top male heroes could hardly hold on to their role when casted against Sri Devi. Showtime, September, 1987 reported „Is Sri Devi a hero?“ The attitude and perception on women had totally changed in this time. Women in Indian cinema have given tremors to traditional society norms. For example, Devika Rani, cofounder of Bombay Talkies studio, was one of the most powerful actresses of her time and gave Hindi cinema's first kiss, and perhaps the longest one.

Bollywood Heroines in 1990s

Then came the period of 1990s. It brought more changes in the Hindi Cinema. The films of this time showed the changing role of female component in Indian Cinema. One such film "Mohra" made in 1994 featured Raveena Tandon (as Roma Singh). Roma's body language depicted her as a very "liberated" woman. Writing in "G" - an Indian film magazine, Monica Motwani observed "the heroine may have metamorphosed over the years, but she still cannot break away from the shackles of certain norms set by Hindi cinema years ago." Women lost the space they had created for themselves. Heroes grabbed the

centre stage and the heroines just relegated to a glamorous film component. Their presence contributed nothing to move the story forward. The more India became global the more the Bollywood films regressed. Some filmmakers attempted stories on the empowerment of women, and actresses like Tabu and Vidya Balan got a rare chance to carry it on their shoulders. But such opportunities were few and far between. Some hit films of the post-liberalization era of 1990s, showed a desire for a traditional way of life where women looked after their homes and men earned the bread. Madhuri Dixit stole hearts in the biggest hits of the 1990s, *Hum Apke Hai Kaun*, she also established the trend of heroines who would never put their own dreams ahead of the aspirations and desires of their family. The caring homemaker role of the women was back in trend. The more recent films of late 1990s, like „*Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*“, „*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*“, „*Dil Toh Pagal Hai*“, „*Biwi No.1*“, all had women as decorations and as homemakers. None of these films made by contemporary young filmmakers presented women as career women. Even the film *Dil Chahta Hai*, known to be a Generation X movie, made by a young director, caught to the traditional role for its female leads. While the three male characters in the film had identities apart from their romantic ones, the females didn't have any identity of their own. Only one character (Dimple Kapadia) is having a career but does not have a happy ending while the man who loves her finds a normal girlfriend. Among the directors of the above-mentioned films, several have studied abroad and their lifestyle is influenced by the western values. They have seen Hollywood films but still returned to traditional Indian values and conservatism through the female characters in their films.

Bollywood Heroines in modern time

Singh (2007) shows how the popular cinema draws heavily upon the Indian mythology for its popular appeal. It mainly shares the interests and values of male prejudice, dramatizing male fantasies of the female. Hence a woman is depicted either as an angel or as a monster. Sometime afterwards, in the 1990s, the line between the heroine and vamp disappeared. The heroine dressed as boldly and moved as provocatively as the bad girl of old times. Some critics opined that as an effect of globalization and consumerism where mass production demanded heroines to become more ornamental than real woman. She might be shown dancing in snow-covered Switzerland or Australia but basically sticks to the ideal woman Indian males fantasize about

which is being a homemaker. The change of images has not been a sudden one but happened slowly. Some changes in the women's typical characters have been evident in the films. For example Jiah Khan, in "Nishabd" is a fresh change. It focuses on the teenager's growing consciousness of her sexuality. She accepts confidently by reaching out to a man more than twice of her age. It has become possible partly with the entry of small cinema. Encouraged by the multiplex culture, new directors have started to acknowledge the changing time to bring their own dreams in scripts. Today, when an actress poses in a bikini in a film or for the cover of a magazine, it sets tongues wagging. But, let us not forget that it's not new- Mehtab did a topless bathtub sequence in Kidar Sharma's "Chitralekha" in 1942. History repeats itself.

CONCLUSION

Cinemas and advertisements reflect society. Mankekar 1999, ethnographic study of television and its intersection with gender and national identity offers a critical perspective on how media representations of women influence and reflect societal attitudes. When we see movies of a particular time, we get to know the society at that time. Movies have a stake in social change as well. During Indian freedom struggle, movies did their bit to spread the spirit of nationalism among common people. With changing times, movies too had undergone a lot of changes. But the progress in portrayal of women in Indian cinema has not caught the progress of our society yet. As there are more movie lovers in India than the rest of the world, the impact of movies on Indian society is huge. India is still a patriarchal society, so does the Indian film industry. Though times are changing, men's ideals and their fantasies are still taking up most of the space in Indian cinema. Some of these things are regressive and derogatory towards women. And it is true that the number of movies that have meaningful roles for women is increasing. Hence it is important to discuss how far have we come and what issues need to be addressed in the portrayal of women in Indian cinema.

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