THE GENDER QUESTION AND FEMINIST DEBATE IN CONTEMPORARY HINDI CINEMA

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Abstract

Bell Hooks (2000) has rightly pointed out in her book, 'Feminism is for EVERYBODY: Passionate Politics' that sexism is not only perpetuated by men, but also women. Thus, it becomes problematic when women become the torch bearers of patriarchy and succeed in reinforcing the gendered stereotypical notions while socialising the young.The assimilation of gender roles and expectations reinforce the gender binaries and act as stumbling blocks in the creation of a gender neutral society. The purpose of my paper is to examine the portrayal of women characters in women-centric cinema, who reinforce and perpetuate such stereotypical beliefs and attitudes. I have attempted to cull out a broad interpretative framework, under which I have analysed four broad construals, which have a significant impact on the relational roles and identity development of girls and women. These construals have been culled through the content, narrative and character analysis of three contemporary movies-Thappad (2020), Shakuntala Devi (2020) and Tribhanga (2021). While these movies deal with issues related to women's agency, space, assertion of independent will, sexuality and empowerment, they also propel us to delve into the socialisation norms, practices, relational roles and identities, all of which go into the construction of womanhood, making of these characters and their psyche. My paper attempts to emphasize that the idea of gender justice is possible through the establishment of strong bond of sisterhood, renunciation of sexist mode of thinking which keeps the women constantly at war with each other and breaking free from the hegemonic narratives of masculinity and femininity.

Key words: *Gender Question, Feminist debate, Sexist thinking, Gender justice and Sisterhood*

Introduction

Justice Pushpa V. Ganediwala, a Mumbai High Court judge, delivered a controversial verdict on January 19, 2021, acquitting a sexual offender, who pressed the breasts of a twelve year old girl child on the following grounds: ''As such, there is no direct physical contact i.e.; skin to skin with sexual intent without penetration'' (Indian Express, January 25, 2021). The justification that ''stricter proof and serious allegations are required'' for the act to be categorised under Protection Of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) in itself reveals the skewed gendered lens with which this case has been dealt with. What baffles me the most in this regard is the manifestation of sexist thinking by the woman judge, who failed to show empathy and gender sensitivity. This judgement sets the tone of my paper. It becomes problematic when women fail to empathise with the issues and concerns of other women. Gender justice can never be achieved if women continue to be the upholders of patriarchal values.

Gender equality can only be achieved when individuals look beyond strict gender binaries, which reinforce

stetreotypical traits and characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity. The biological inferiority of females has been emphasized by Aristotle, who considers them as a ''mutilated male'', incapable of reason and decision making abilities. According to him, ''The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying..''[1] (Bhasin, 2003, p. 10).While masculinity is associated with traits such as dominance, competition, self-assertion; femininity is associated with complete subservience, co-operation, passivity, caring and nurturing. These defining traits truly reflect the patriarchal mindset, attitudes and beliefs and the assimilation and internalisation of these characteristics pose a huge challenge in the achievement of gender parity.

Bell Hooks (2000) has rightly pointed out that sexism is not only perpetuated by men but also by women. It becomes problematic when women emerge as torchbearers of paternalistic domination by trying to fit themselves and the significant others into the stereotypical gender mould through a rigorous practice of gender indoctrination. Women's sense of self is defined in relation to others- that of being an ideal daughter, wife, mother and daughter-in-law.The relational self manifests the gendered and societal expectations and the individual self reflects their desires, preferences, ambitions and aspirations. The societal prescriptions expect them to subjugate and sacrifice their individual self at the altar of relational roles and expectations. Women's assertion of voice, agency, personal space, autonomy and free will not only challenges the patriarchal structure, but also leads to the disruption of domestic harmony.

The Gender Question and Feminist Debate in Contemporary Women-Centric Cinema

The purpose of my paper is to examine the portrayal of women characters, who perpetuate these biases and stereotypes in contemporary women-centric movies. The gender question enables one to perceive the woman's place in the society. I would like to discuss Thapan's (2009) perspective on embodiment in this context, wherein she states that, 'a woman is undoubtedly located in a physical and psychological space as much as she is in the cultural and social domain.'(p.xiii). Thus, the gender question enables us to critically examine the socialisation practices, which play a pivotal role in the formation of relational and social identity. The feminist debate on the other hand is informed by Hook's (2000) theory of feminism, wherein she considers women as equal perperators in reinforcing gender stereotypes. The sexist thinking practised by the central characters not only impedes the establishment of strong female bonding, but also keeps them at war with the other women who fail to conform to the relational roles and expectations. The cinematic portrayals of women characters reflects the male gaze. In this context, I am not only talking about the commodification and objectification of women, who exist to placate male desires and fantasies, but also about a man's perception of how a woman should act and behave. Women-centric cinema directed by women film makers delineates issues and concerns from the feminist perspective and emphasize on the female gaze- their desires, needs, aspirations, perspective and lens. A new image of womanhood is constructed through the portrayal of strong, independent and emancipated women who challenge and defy stereotypes, gender equations and patriarchal beliefs. It is interesting to note that while the contemporary women-centric cinema show women in lead roles, they also make conspicuous women's internalised sexism towards other women.

The conflict between relational, social and personal/individual self has been manifested through several women-centric movies. A woman has to pay the price for asserting her individual will is reflected through movies such as *Tumhari*

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[1] Ehrenreich, Barbara and Deirdre English. 1988. *For Her Own Good: 50 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women.* London: Pluto Press, p. 19.

Sulu (2017) and *Panga* (2020). Sulu is an ambitious homemaker, who ends up taking a job as a radio jockey. However, her career choice ends up disrupting the marital harmony. While she successfully balances the personal and professional space through her multitasking abilities, she is blamed for prioritising her career over her family when her son is suspended from school. The film has a happy ending with the dynamic and versatile Sulu carving out alternative career trajectory for herself- one which doesn't end up disrupting the domestic harmony. The ending in itself seems problematic, for it reveals that a woman's choice of career and fulfilment of dreams and aspirations cannot be at the cost of domestic harmony. While *Panga* (2020) has a punchline that every mother deserves a second chance, it manifests the societal bias in accepting a woman's come back to kabbadi post marriage and motherhood. The perception that matrimony and motherhood robs a woman of her talent and skills reveals the strong gendered lens. While these movies reinforce positive images of womanhood, they also mirror the sexist mode of thinking which the characters have to battle against to realise their dreams.

Analysis and Interpretation of Issues From the Lens of Women-Centric Films

Before moving on to the analysis, I would like to briefly highlight the storyline and the issues flagged in the three movies- *Thappad* (2020), *Shakuntala Devi* (2020) and *Tribhanga* (2021). *Thappad* is a married woman's fight for justice, dignity, rights and her retaliation against the violence meted out to her by her husband. *Shakuntala Devi* is the story of the ambitious mathematical wizard, her aspirations, dreams and her turbulent relationship with her mother and daughter, Anupama. *Tribhanga* is the story of three generation of women-each of them carving out their identities in their independent way. It depicts the turbulent relationship between mothers and daughters and also their modes of negotiations and resistance.
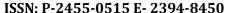
On the basis of the analysis of these three movies, I have attempted to cull out four broad construals of identity development in girls and women. These construals have been analysed on the basis of storyline, characterisation, narratives, circumstances and situations in which the women characters have been placed. All these movies depict strong, independent, self-willed, emancipated, uncompromising, empowered women who unfetter themselves from their relational ties and responsibilities and remain unapologetic about their life choices.

❖ Gendered Socialisation and internalised sexism: According to Ruth Harley, socialisation takes place through four processes, namely, manipulation, canalisation, verbal appellation and activity exposure. All four processes are normally differentiated by sex and all are features of the child's socialisation from birth on. (Oakley, Ann. 1985, p.174-175)[2]. This process of moulding the girls and boys into gender appropriate roles leads to the internalisation of certain attitudes and traits, which become a part of their personality. Women are expected to be selfless, submissive, compliant, passive and subservient. They are supposed to give primacy to their relational self and sacrifice their individual needs, desires and aspirations.

In *Thappad* (2020), Amrita's life and identity revolves around her husband and mother-in-law. She is portrayed as a selfless wife and an ideal daughter-in-law whose happiness lies in taking care of her husband and mother-in-law's needs. She considers herself fortunate for having got married into an upper class family. Amrita's obliteration of sense of self and identity is manifested through her unquestioning acceptance of the servile status and feeling of gratitude of being accepted as a daughter-in-law into a rich family. The absence of female bonding is reflected through the sexist attitude of her mother-in-law, Sulekha, who normalises the violence meted out to

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[2] Oakley, Ann. 1985. *Sex, Gender and Society*. England: Gower Publishing Company, p. 16.
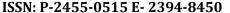
Amrita in the presence of a huge gathering, who have been invited to celebrate her husband's promotion. Amrita is deprived of the right to privacy, for when she goes into her room to recover from the feeling of hurt and humiliation, Sulekha asks her to come out and be cordial towards the guests. Instead of reprimanding her son, Sulekha makes her daughter-in-law understand that such things are normal in marriage and must be forgotten. The failure of Amrita's mother to take a stance also manifests the gendered attitude wherein parents are not supposed to interfere into the marital affairs of their daughter. Patriarchal lens and deep seated bias of the film maker comes into fore when he portrays Amrita going back to her marital home to inform her husband and mother-in-law about her pregnancy, for she finds it difficult to shirk the relational obligations. Even when Sulekha turns out to be unwell, Amrita stays back to take care of her. The internalisation of the patriarchal values and biases are so deep that even a well established lawyer like Netra Jaisingh counsels Amrita not to make a big deal of the physical violence meted out to her. Netra herself passively endures the emotional, physical and sexual violence meted out to her by her husband.

The gendered expectations and sexist behaviour in *Tribhanga* is manifested through the devaluation of Nayantara's writing abilities by her mother-in-law. The denial of creative space and continuous blame for neglecting her duties as a mother and daughter-in-law makes her feel suffocated. Nayantara experiences betrayal when her husband is unable to take a stance against his mother. She defies all stereotypes, gives primacy to her individual and creative self and asserts her independence by unfettering herself from the stifling marital relationship. Her granddaughter, Masha, who has been a witness to the dysfunctional family set up, yearns for a normal life and circumscribes to the stereotypical expectations for the preservation of domestic harmony. She negotiates by making compromises in order to gain acceptance in the marital home such as covering her head with a 'dupatta' while making a video call to her mother-in-law or undergoing the prenatal sex determination test. Masha justifies her actions before her mother, Anuradha on the ground that she wanted to give a normal family life to her child-something which she has never had. The normative behaviour refers to unquestioning obedience to the patriarchal norms and values.

Society penalises women who challenge patriarchal norms and assert their agency by breaking free of the relational ties, roles and expectations. For instance, when Nayantara leaves her husband, the school teacher ridicules her daughter, Anuradha, for bearing her mother's surname. Her mother's divorced status makes Anuradha the object of ridicule before peers. Even Masha confesses before her mother that she would always be scared of the parent-teacher meetings as Anuradha always used to turn up with a new boyfriend. Anuradha's career as a bollywood actress and her status as a single mother made Masha the object of ridicule. The gendered lens is reflected through the teacher's perception of Anuradha as a woman of loose morals, for she asked Masha how much her mother charged from her customers. The fact that daughters have to bear the burden of the choices made by their mothers is reflected through the lives of Anuradha and Masha.

❖ Motherhood-daughterhood- relational roles and expectations: Mothers emerge as the strongest support system for their daughters, who look up to them as their ideal. A mother is supposed to be devoid of personal aspirations, ambitions and converge her identity with that of her family. She is expected to be selflessly serving her children and be always available for them. However, when mothers like Shakuntala Devi, Nayantara and Anuradha refuse to conform to the stereotypical mould, there arises a disruption in the relationship between them and their children.
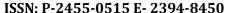
In *Shakuntala Devi*, Anupama blames her mother for having kept her away from her father. Shakuntala's sense of insecurity and fear of being an incompetent mother makes her sever all ties with her husband. Shakuntala is critical of her mother for her inability to retaliate against the injustice meted out to her eldest daughter. Her mother's lack of agency costs her eldest sister's life. Shakuntala promises to herself that she would be the best mother for her daughter. After her daughter's birth, she gets overwhelmed by the child care responsibilities and misses her professional space. Shakuntala's sense of devaluation results in bitterness and frustration, which she is able to overcome with her husband's support. Her insecurity resurfaces when she hears her daughter uttering 'baba' instead of 'ma'. The fear of not being able to fit into the role of a perfect mother intimidates her as unlike her husband, she was unable to spend time with her daughter owing to her multiple professional commitments. This guilt factor propelled her to travel everywhere along with her child.

The disruption of the normative family structure due to the mothers' assertion of agency and space turns out to be problematic for their children, who start perceiving them as selfish. Anupama expects her mother, Shakuntala to sacrifice her career and stay with her all the time. Masha in *Tribhanga* expected her mother to understand her concerns, worries, peer pressure and insecurities during childhood and adolescence. Even Anuradha held her mother responsible for turning a blind eye towards the sexual abuse she was facing at the hands of her step father. For Anuradha, Nayantara failed to become an ideal mother- the one who provided a safe haven for her children and created an environment of care and love. Consequently, she alienated from her mother, whom she started addressing as Nayan instead of 'Aayee'. Flouting of gendered expectations resulted in the daughters severing all ties with their mothers. Daughters failed to appreciate the fact that their mothers were individuals in their own right and had desires, aspirations and ambitions. On the contrary, they wanted them to be 'normal' like others. Even if this normalcy was achieved at the cost of stifling one's individual and creative self.

Diverse images of motherhood emerges through cinematic portrayals. We evince passive mothers like Shakuntala's mother who silently bore the injustice and oppression; unconvential mothers like Shakuntala and Shivani Fonseca who through their progressive upbringing encouraged their daughters to transcend the gender boundaries; non-conformist mothers like Nayantara; protective mothers like Anuradha, who fiercely retaliated against the domestic violence meted out to her by her Russian husband in order to protect her unborn child. She also made sure that Masha was not subject to any form of sexual abuse and did not permit any of her boyfriends to stay at her place.

❖ Female desire and autonomy has always been a subject of contention. A woman who expresses her desire-be it sexual or otherwise had the power to shake the patriarchal social order into a state of sexual uncertainty (V. Geetha 2007). Through the cinematic portrayals we evince bold and courageous women like Netra Jaisingh, Swati, Shakuntala, Nayantara and Anuradha, who are unapologetic about their life choices and unafraid to speak their mind. These women are not male haters as they establish extra marital relationships with several men (with the exception of Swati). They loved the attention they received from their admirers. These heterosexual relationships not only provided them sexual and emotional gratification, but also compensated for the lack of the missing elements in their marital lives-companionship and respect. However, in all these relationships, the women characters show non-committal attitude, for they are not willing to be bound by the relational ties and expectations. For them, preservation of individual selves take a predominance over the relational selves.

Autonomy is reflected through Shivani Fonseca's choice to remain unmarried after her husband's death. She is quite content with her job and status as a single mother.

It is also manifested through the dedication and passion which Netra, Shakuntala, Nayantara and Anuradha exhibit towards their careers. Shakuntala realises from early childhood that her professional identity is going to earn her respect. She tells her sister, Kalyani, that when she grows up she would turn into a big woman. She is proud of being the breadearner of the family right from a very young age. Her love for Mathematics gives meaning to her life. Similarly, for Nayantara and Anuradha writing and dance are their lifelines. Career is allied with self-esteem of these women and signifies their celebration of individuality. Autonomy is also reflected through the unconventional life choices made by each of them.

- ❖ Establishment of sisterhood- There is a strong bond of sisterhood which exists between all the women characters across movies. All the women characters- Amrita, Netra, Shakuntala, Nayantara and Anuradha assert their individuality, agency, space and freedom by breaking free of the stifling marital relationships. In fact, Anuradha refers to marriage as 'societal terrorism'- one which curtails women's freedom, agency and clips their wings by keeping them in a state of bondage forever.

Female bonding is established when the daughters experience a reflection of their mother's lives and are forced to re-examine their long-held beliefs. Shakuntala empathises with her mother when she experiences a rift in her relationship with her daughter. The act of embracing her mother's saree shows Shakuntala's deep remorse for the time lost and her unconditional acceptance of her mother. When Anupama juggles between her work, home and child care responsibilities, she empathises with Shakuntala's struggles and appreciates all that her mother has done for her. In *Thappad*, Shivani's thirteen year old daughter empathises with her mother and encourages her to move on in life after her father's death.

Anuradha in *Tribhanga* blames her mother initially for being totally blind to the sexual abuse she had faced at the hands of her step-father. However, the realisation that she is exactly like her mother comes when her daughter, Masha indirectly blames her for turning a blind eye to the ridicule she was subject to everytime Anuradha visited her school with a new boyfriend. Anuradha's awareness of her mother's passion makes her strongly empathise when she learns from the latter's biographer that Nayantara was unable to write due to arthiritis problem.

The establishment of sisterhood in the movie *Thappad* is evinced through the bonding established between Amrita and her brother's fiance, Swati, who fiercely supports her decision. Even her lawyer, Netra Jaisingh, takes pride in the decision taken by Amrita. The spirit of activism dawns upon Netra after she wins Amrita's case, for she decides to start her life anew. Netra decides to leave her oppressive home environment and severs all ties with her boyfriend. Even Shivani lends support to Amrita by retaliating against the latter's husband when he comes to seek her support to falsely implicate Amrita in court. Female bonding is manifested through Sulekha's empathy and acquiescence of Amrita's decision. She says that the parents are to be blamed for practising differential socialisation practices which perpetuates gender bias and prejudices. Through such practices they fail to inculcate in their sons values such as gender equality, respect towards women. Consequently, the women/daughters/daughter-in-laws are supposed to shoulder the gender burden and are expected to be subservient to the needs of others.

Conclusion

A sense of female solidarity is evinced in all these movies as the women characters make a transition from being the upholders of patriarchal values to developing greater sensitivity and empathy towards the other. All these women characters are able to confront their internalised sexism towards other women in the light of which they have been perceiving their relationships. The celebration of womanhood is evinced through the portrayal of strong, independent, self-willed, resilient, defiant women, who make flawed choices, but are ready to accept the responsibility for the same. The detachment from the relational self, unconditional acceptance and appreciation of the individual and creative self becomes the basis for the establishment of a strong bond of sisterhood.

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