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## A Study of the Portrayal of Female Characters in Bollywood Films

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### **Abstract:**

A study of the Bollywood films will always be incomplete without the portrayal of its heroines. Heroines have basically occupied a secondary position in comparison to their heroes. The commercial market which hovers around this film circle and the success of the box office is determined by many factors. These factors are some standards set by our patriarchal society. The success of the film mainly depends on the casting of the hero who almost independently carries the success of the film on his shoulder. Secondarily, the film depends on the heroine who conventionally has to be very beautiful, within a certain age and adhere to some of the pre-requisites of the trade. Bollywood films have mainly reduced the heroine to a subaltern figure. The Bollywood heroine can be studied through the lens of postcolonial feminism.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial feminism, Bollywood, heterosexual love, archetypal romance.

This paper will critically look at the portrayal of female characters in Bollywood films. My theory or critical stance will be postcolonial feminism though the study will not be limited by it. Postcolonial feminism is a women centric movement which is aimed at portraying the third world women's experiences which were not fully represented by the first world feminists. The latter half of the Twentieth century Bollywood Films propagates the female figure of the mother, beloved, faithful daughter, obedient sister, dependant sister, widowed daughter-in-law or sister, scheming in-laws or friends in a negative role. Whether it is the dialogue or performing songs, the women are mainly assigned subordinate roles and this is often repeated in films after films. In some rare films women are given empowered roles which will be discussed subsequently.

In feminism we mainly have three waves which can be broadly categorised as first wave feminism, second wave feminism and third wave feminism.

First wave feminism – The first wave feminism originated in the late nineteenth century. The participants were the white, middle class women who demanded access to education. It focused on the suffrage of women and some legal rights like divorce and property rights. Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792) is a seminal text.

Thus this first-wave feminism is often criticized for only including the demands of first world white women.

Second Wave Feminism - It began in the early 1960s and sought to look at the gender discrimination which existed both in the private and public sphere. Such issues could be in the family or workplace. Sexuality and reproductive rights were some of the issues.

Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 book 'The Second Sex' wrote that one is not born a woman but becomes one. She points out that gender constructions are fixed by patriarchy to limit the role of women in the family and society. She points out in detail how the myths created about women are meant to further put them in a subordinate role. Introduction of contraception is an achievement which helped women to pursue careers. The Bollywood heroine is a target of these gender constructions which will be studied here in some selected films.

### **Target of postcolonial feminism**

The origin of postcolonial feminism is mainly taken as 1980s. The underrepresentation of the third world women is addressed. There is also a critique of the feminist theories in the developed countries. The term 'woman' is not only defined by gender but also by social class, race, ethnicity or sexual preference. The feminism in the third world is influenced by the socio-economic factors. Third world women as the subaltern is discussed by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985)

### **Bollywood heroine as the subaltern**

The Bollywood heroine can be termed as subaltern in many ways. She has been mostly treated as the second lead to her hero. She is often sexualised, sometimes mistreated, underpaid or her hygiene is compromised on many grounds. At first the heroine had no access to vanity vans and she had also no access to proper separate toilets as yesteryear heroines like Asha Parekh says that she had to use the bushes. The heroines have to sit for

hours for makeup and elaborate hair. She has to wear chiffon sarees or minimal dress in zero climates while her hero wears protective wear in order to increase her visual appeal. The heroine always caters to the male gaze and her appearance gets modified according to the demands of the audience. The heroines mainly come from the family of actors or they are groomed from theatre or procured from beauty contests like Miss India, Miss World or Miss Universe or any local talent hunt competitions. The famous Bollywood families like the Khans or the Kapoors run the films like a family business and new talents emerge from their background. Dieticians, hair and makeup artists, managers, yoga teachers, social networking members and gym trainers and a lot of specialised team members work on the heroine nowadays. Bollywood heroine is almost a package which has to be tested, surveyed and processed in cinematic lab.

### **Extreme physical transformation to stay in Bollywood**

The body of the Bollywood heroine undergoes a lot of transformation in order to remain in this business. She has to maintain a zero figure or go bulky if the film demands. There are several films which demand extreme transformation on the part of the heroine. Bhumi Padnekar in 'Dum Laga Ke Haisa' had to put on several kilos in order to play the part of a fat housewife. Kareena Kapoor reduced to size zero for her films and at that time anorexic heroines were the norm. Vidya Balan and Twinkle Khanna confess in their interviews that they had to follow extreme diets to qualify for their films like 'Parineeta', 'Mela' and later they realised that being the Bollywood heroine was not their cup of tea anymore. The heroine undergoes several treatments like liposuction, nose-hip surgery which often turn out to be a life risk. This is also true for the hero in this business.

### **Characteristics of a typical Bollywood romance**

Talking about a typical Bollywood romance, we find that there are certain features which are often formulaic. The Devdas or the love triangle theme has been periodically explored by film makers. Parvati is the radha like figure who loves Devdas the next door neighbour but is forced to marry with parental permission only. Bimal Roy's 1955 film 'Devdas' ( director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's new version released in 2002 ) based on Sarat Chandra Chattyopadhyay's Bengali novel struck a chord with many Indians who knew the onus of parental dictates in marriage institution and its pitfalls. Shilpa Shetty starrer 'Dhadkan' (2000) is a much later example.

We have reiteration of heterosexual love stories, heroes characterised by aggressive masculinity and pursuing the shy and reluctant heroine. We have regressive gender roles, rape culture, extreme possessiveness and sexual violence. An archetypal romance is established by film makers like Sooraj R. Barjatya, Yash Chopra, Karan Johar to name a few.

Patriarchal norms are established like the heroine is to be teased and almost forced to marry the elder brother to take care of her dead sister's child. Eve teaser heroes were the norms of the day and we find college going heroes and his friends teasing heroines and her group. Such films propagate very dangerous eve teasing ideas and establishes the lore of cringing Bollywood heroines. In a typical Bollywood film we find that the values of the traditional family are upheld. We also find that the state law is highly unequal in its dealings with women like 'Raja Ki Ayegi Barat' (1997) and 'Damini'(1993). In the former film, Raja rapes Mala and the court gives a verdict that Raja should marry her. Her in-laws continue to torture her and even attempts to kill her but she proves to be resilient and wins them with her goodness. In 'Damini', a housemaid (a truly subaltern character) is raped by the younger brother and his friends and is punished by the court. Domestic laws are at war with public laws.

I will take some of the films which became very popular in their times and study the portrayal of the heroines and other female characters. Sooraj Barjatya as a director gave us films like 'Hum Aapke Hain Kaun' (1994). 'Maine Pyar Kiya' (1989), 'Hum Saath Saath Hain' (1999), 'Mein Prem Ki Diwani Hoon' (2003), 'Prem Ratan Dhan Payo' (2015), 'Vivah' (2006) where family was the centre and individuals sacrificed their needs for the sake of the family. The hero and the heroines are the epitomes of goodness. The characters are mainly stereotypical and not at all complex. In 'Hum Aapke Hain Kaun', the character of Nisha played by Madhuri Dixit is an ideal sister who was expected to sacrifice her love for Prem (played by Salman Khan) and marry the husband of her dead sister. The film celebrates marriage and different rituals connected with it. This type of film later gave rise to similar types of mega serials which went on for years celebrating the family values and emotional upheavals, songs and dances. 'Maine Pyar Kiya' (1989) is again a Salman Khan film which portrays friendship and love and the associated trials and tribulations. Suman's father tests Prem's love for his daughter. Here patriarchal and masculine values are praised. Suman is basically a Sati Savitri figure, an obedient daughter and thus a potential ideal wife.

Gender inequality is routinely found in dialogues, dressing, education, child bearing responsibility and family duties. Women are found to be dependent on men for everything whether it be father, brother, lover or husband and son afterwards. Family lineage is carried forward especially by son as in 'Karan Arjun' (1995).

### **Item numbers**

Item songs portray women as commodities and market the films and help in the postcolonial commercial era. Women are dressed in visually appealing dress and songs are inserted which have no or little connection to the film whatsoever. These songs accompanied by dances were performed by a side character or in some cases the heroine herself. The most famous and earliest item girl was Helen who performed songs like 'Mehbooba Mehbooba' (Sholay 1975), 'Piya Tu Ab To Aaja' (Caravan), 'O Haseena Zulfonwale Jane Jahan' (Teesre Manzil), 'Aaj ki Raat Koi Aane Ko Hai' (1967), 'Yeh Mera Dil' (1998), 'O Mungada Mungada' (Inkaar, 1977) and many others.

Young generations find these numbers very appealing and these are repeatedly played in parties and idol immersion processions. Such songs promote the films which are often forgotten except for the item number. Even foreign actresses are imported from outside to perform such item numbers like Katrina Kaif, Nora Fatehi, Sunny Leone, Lauren Gottlieb and Jacqueline Fernandez.

### **The anti-hero's sexual aggression towards women**

In 'Bazigar' (1993) which is a remake of 'A Kiss Before Dying' (1991), the father's sins have to be paid by his daughters. Sexual aggression and punishing the woman is made normative in this society where men betray men and do not allow him to develop to his maximum potential. Audience even feel larger collective sympathy for the anti-hero even when he murders the elder daughter of the family. The women are used as scapegoats and mere commodities to be thrown away if not relevant. Remaking a foreign film is itself a postcolonial phenomenon and making the character relevant to the Indian market. The heroines are often dressed in Indian traditional clothes to put up her good image while the shrewd women are portrayed as wearing foreign clothes.

In 'Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge' (1995), Simran belongs to an extremely conservative Punjabi Family. She has no say in her marriage decisions but her growth as an individual girl occurs when she goes on a solo journey to Europe on her own and indulges in some of the

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forbidden pleasures to which she was not allowed to in her home. DDLJ and other Bollywood films opened various spots of shooting for tourism in foreign countries like Switzerland or in India itself. Films opened commercial places for the local tourism.

### **Representation of Iconic ‘Hindu Widowhood’ and the Cinematic Imagination**

In colonial India, particularly in the late 19th century, the Hindu widow acquired primacy in the social reformist circuits all over India. The urge to ‘modernize’ Hinduism prevailed throughout the freedom struggle. The ‘Hindu widow’ was discussed and debated passionately. There were two schools of thought - those who were in favour and those in opposition to the widow - remarriage. Interestingly, the widow was articulated and imagined as the ideal self-abnegating ‘mother’, who could keep the nation together like a family. Her suffering was often used as a metaphor for the subjugated nation. By the 1920s, nationalist reformers constructed a new understanding of ‘morality’ and ‘inner strength’ through the icon of the widow. The icon which became popular as Mother India or ‘Bharat Mata’, was essentially a Hindu widow. This iconography was continued and popularized in the post-independence (1947) period by the Bombay filmmakers. The post 1947 period brought new challenges of reconstructing economy as well as the aftermath of Partition. The agrarian household was the primary unit of Indian economy. The attention of the intellectuals and artists turned towards the impoverished peasantry and the question of resettlement of land and resources. The national glory and memory of the freedom struggle was woven together with the reality of poverty and inequality. In a 1957 movie, called ‘Mother India’, the widow was represented as a peasant woman struggling with the feudal structure (money lender and landlord). This overshadowed the idea of father as bread earner; man of the household. The mother was shown as the only earning member who raised children and whose physical hard labour redefined her ‘femininity’. Various other dimensions of this film are explored such as, Gandhian idealism, gender and the family relationship. This film caught the imagination of people across India. It was the first Indian film to be nominated for the best film in foreign language at the Oscars.

The young widow was not an unexplored theme. The inspiration came from 19th century reformism. The representation of the question of young widow’s sexuality and morality was best done in the 1970s and 80s in some of the commercial hits such as – ‘Sholay’ (fire balls), ‘Kati Patang’ (a torn kite), ‘Prem Rog’ (love struck). More recently, in the movie ‘Water’ (2001) the widow continued to be represented as an ultimate sufferer. (This is a reversal of

the strength of the widow projected in ‘Mother India’). This cinema represents certain experiences of widowhood which may be read as a unique cultural experience. Some Indian feminists have critiqued the cinema on young widows as being a titillating experience for the male audience because most of these movies include rape and violence. The widows also emerge as objects of reform, waiting for generous men. I shall also elaborate on the on screen representation of caste and class which add a dimension of complexity to the experience of ‘Hindu widowhood’.

### **Negative roles for women**

Women are often cast in negative roles and they become popular and known for them. “Khal-Naaikaa” (1993) is one such film where a negative role is played by Anu Aggarwal. This film is a remaking of the Hollywood film “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle” (1992). Anuradha is the nanny hired by Jaya to look after her son Munna. Jaya does not know that she had given evidence against Anuradha’s doctor husband who had molested many other women and now Anuradha having lost her husband and unborn child is bent on getting revenge. She becomes so blind in grief that her revenge is unjustified as her husband was indeed guilty.

### **The powerful and liberated heroine**

“Khoun Bhari Mang” (1988) is the film of an empowered widow Aarti Saxena who at first is presented as a dependant widow with good wealth in search of a man to protect her and her children. She marries Sanjay Verma (acted by Kabir Bedi) and his girlfriend Nandini (acted by Sonu Walia) plays the Cupid. Rakesh Roshan directed this film. Sanjay plots with his girlfriend and pushes Rekha off the boat on to a pond of crocodiles. Rekha miraculously survives with the help of a benevolent man, sells off her diamond earrings, goes to foreign country for a plastic surgery treatment and becomes the best version of herself. Rekha replaces Nandini in the modelling field and avenges her ill-treatment from Sanjay.

### **Heroines in Queer films**

Deepa Mehta’s “Fire” (1996) is about the story of two daughter-in-laws and how they become dependant on each other. Deepa is an Indian born Canadian film director known for her trilogy ‘Fire’ (1996), ‘Earth’ (1998) and ‘Water’ (2005). Her films speak of her dual sensibility – that of her birth nation and westernized view towards life. Her liberal films often attract much controversy and face boycott and stark criticism from Hindu fundamentalists. Her films portray the deep dark truths in family and society which are shoved under the bed

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or better not confronted by the rational society. Radha (played by Sabana Azmi), the elder wife is trapped in a loveless marriage with Ashok who has vowed to be an ascetic. The younger daughter-in-law Sita (played by Nandita Das) faces a similar predicament with her husband Jatin who is more interested in his girlfriend. Radha and Sita finds love in each other and thus break the patriarchal and familial norms. They explore alternative sexuality as a means of respite from suffocating norms of heterosexual marriage.

Partition and its after effects have been the burning problem for many decades and this topic has been the favourite for many film makers. Deepa Mehta's "Fire" (1998) is the story of three lovers caught in the backdrop of the partition atrocities. Amir Khan's Dil Navaz is the ice-candy man who loves Shanta the nanny acted by Nandita Das along with Hasan (the masseur). All three are good friends even though they belong to different religions. At the end, jilted in love Dil Navaz hands over the hide-out of Shanta to a raging crowd and crowd and she becomes the site for the open atrocities brought by the partition.

The Bollywood heroine has no say to her call time or shooting hours. She has to wait for the hero and the other casting members to arrive on the set. She has played every role from young to old from positive to negative. Her screen time is dictated by her popularity and her contribution to the success of the film. A heroine's stay in the industry is determined by the market politics and the cultural mindset. A heroine with fair skin, unusual beauty, unconventional beauty and with foreign roots is preferred over others. The Indian heroine is idealized down the times and she is the figure of the Sati Savitri by the side of her hero. She was mainly conceived as an ideal woman of virtue playing a supporting role in many Bollywood movies. With times she developed an independent frame of mind and spirit in films like 'Pink', 'Mardaani', 'Mom', 'Queen' and 'Padmavati'.

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