

GENDER REFLECTIONS IN MAINSTREAM HINDI CINEMA

Nidhi Shendurnikar Tere

Junior Research Scholar
Department of Political Science,
Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Gujarat, India
Website: <http://www.msubaroda.ac.in>
Email: mailtonidhi@sify.com,
Blog: www.68pagesofmylife.blospot.com

Abstract : *Cinema is meant and believed to entertain, to take the viewer to a world that is starkly different from the real one, a world which provides escape from the daily grind of life. Cinema is a popular media of mass consumption which plays a key role in moulding opinions, constructing images and reinforcing dominant cultural values. The paper deals with representations of women characters in mainstream Bollywood movies. It is deemed appropriate to examine this issue because women are a major chunk of the country's population and hence their portrayal on screen is crucial in determining the furtherance of already existing stereotypes in the society. The paper begins with a discussion on the field of feminist film criticism and how mainstream Hindi Cinema has restricted itself to defined sketches of womanhood. It also undertakes some glimpses from popular films to analyse this process of stereotyping the 'other' – considering that reality in mainstream cinema is constructed from the male view point. A section is devoted to discussion on contemporary realistic brand of cinema and its understanding of women. In conclusion, a debate ensues on whether mainstream Hindi cinema has been successful in portraying Indian women of different shades in a society dominated by patriarchal values.*

Key Words: *Cinema, popular, media, women, Bollywood, movies, stereotypes, feminist, mainstream, patriarchal*

Feminist Film Criticism

The issues of media, identity and gender are being discussed all over today. They have become integral to the discipline of media studies. The reason is the popularity and diversity of media as a source of mass consumption and its influence on constructing ideas and generating debate. The media scene in India has expanded in the recent times as there is a plethora of media choices available to the audiences. Media structures and systems have also undergone a sea change with privatization and globalization. Huge corporations with their own profit motives own media houses. Media has been able to transcend borders and look at issues more holistically rather than in the context of nationalism. Hence, these developments are bound to affect the manner in which media scrutinizes and covers any issue – gender being an important one. Women are also major consumers of mass media and thus the way they are represented in media coverage is a major concern for the discipline. Several international forums have recognized the ramifications of such a transformed media environment on women's access to media, their role in the media structure and the presentation of their perspective in media coverage.¹

In this paper, there has been an attempt to examine the relationship between women and popular Hindi cinema. While cinema in India is in itself a diverse strand of expression incorporating mainstream cinema which holds popular appeal, art/parallel cinema that engages with social issues, middle cinema and regional language cinema. The explorations in this paper are limited to mainstream/popular Hindi cinema better known as

*'Bollywood'*ⁱ because such cinema is seen to exercise widespread influence over people and enjoys mass appeal. Popular cinema and culture derive from each other. Films are believed to be the opium of the Indian masses as people rely on this medium to help them escape to a world of fantasy.ⁱⁱ In a very explicit way, cinema² has shaped the cultural, social and political values of people of this country. While, the other forms of cinema are also important when it comes to the representation of women, restricting to popular cinema is the core concern of the paper.

The interest in films taken by feminists stems from concern about the under-representation and misrepresentation of women in cinema. It adopts a critical approach towards gender bias on celluloid. The feminist approach to cinema asks a few pertinent questions like how women are represented on screen, how women's issues are treated in cinema, what does feminism mean to film-makers, how does the feminist agenda manifest on screen, how is the women character positioned vis a vis the male character and what is the role of women film-makers and women writers in depicting women's issues through cinema.ⁱⁱⁱ Feminist critique of cinema has helped to view the reality presented by cinema in a different way and thus has contributed significantly to the discipline of media studies as well as film studies. Certain underlying aspects of a popular medium can only be brought to surface by criticism, scrutiny and introspection and feminists have attempted to do it with cinema as well as with other fields of study and practice.

The links between Women's Studies and Cinema are evident. After the women's movement, the field of women's studies has allied with almost every discipline to provide an alternative perspective of knowledge and reality as viewed by the practitioners and academia of the discipline. Feminist theory took up a distinct stance in relation to the objectification, exclusion and silence of women in cinematic narratives. It also evaluated the stereotyping of female characters in cinema. For eg: In *'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'* (Laura Mulvey, 1975), the male character was identified as the driver of the film's narrative, the character followed by the camera. The female character served as a spectacle to provide pleasure to the male spectator, for which Mulvey used the term 'gaze'.^{iv} The theory of *'Absences and Presences'* was concerned with the absence of a certain type of female characters in films and the presence of the other type, which was seen to be influenced by patriarchal values. Thus feminist theory in its critique of films incorporated the valorisation of women's experiences thereby posing a challenge to gender hierarchy as well as opening up new realms for a post-gendered future. The paper in its ensuing sections will build an argument about the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema based on various strands of feminist film criticism which have certainly enriched our understanding of women on screen.

The Leading Lady's Sketch

Though there exists a body of feminist film making in Hindi cinema, the leading lady of Hindi films has more or less played defined roles which conform to the values upheld by Indian society. Women in *Bollywood* have been uni-dimensional characters, who are good or bad, white or black. There are no shades of grey. This dichotomy was reinforced in popular films which distinguished between the heroine and the vamp, the wife and the other woman. Films have also been inspired to a large extent from religion and mythology whereby women characters were seen as the epitome of virtue and values, those who could do no wrong. The image of women as *'Sita'* has been repeatedly evoked in many films after independence. Through the ideas of loyalty and obedience to the husband, Hindi cinema successfully institutionalized patriarchal values. Films like *'Dahej'* (1950), *'Gauri'* (1968), *'Devi'* (1970), *'Biwi ho to Aisi'* (1988), *'Pati Parmeshwar'* (1988) depicted women as passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families. In these films, though the practices of

¹ According to Wikipedia, Bollywood is the informal term popularly used for the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, Maharashtra. The term is often incorrectly used to refer to the whole of Indian cinema; it is only a part of the total Indian film industry, which includes other production centers producing films in regional languages. It is one of the largest centers of film production in the world.

² The term 'Cinema' henceforth in this paper will signify mainstream/popular Hindi films

patriarchy were criticized, they were implicitly being patronized in the sense that the victim wife refuses to leave her husband's house despite severe physical and emotional violence by a rationale of leaving the marital house only at the time of her death. This idea has been perpetuated by Indian traditions and symbols like 'doli' (*Palanquin*) and 'arathi' (*Funeral Bier*).

How real are the women characters in Hindi films? This is something to debate about because values, ideals, principles; morals have dominated the frame-work in which these films are placed. Thus, women rather than being depicted as normal human beings are elevated to a higher position of being ideal who can commit no wrong. Their grievances, desires, ambitions, feelings, perspectives are completely missing from the scene. They are really portrayed as the 'other' because they are shown as not belonging to this real and worldly life. For eg: *Abhimaan* (1973) begins with premise of the wife (Jaya Bachchan) being more talented than the husband (Amitabh Bachchan). This in itself is a defiance of the stereotype. However, the film crumbles from then on when the wife gives up her thriving musical career for satisfying the husband's ego culminating to a conventional closure that demands adherence to traditional values of marriage and motherhood.

Bollywood heroines have mostly been homely, content to stay happily ever after in the institution of marriage even if educated and keen to carve and identity of one's own. Where are the women building careers and working professionally? They have been almost silenced. *Shahla Raza* (2003) talks about how Hindi cinema in the seventies had women in different working roles (Jaya Bachchan as a knife sharpener in '*Zanjeer*' and a singer in '*Abhimaan*', Hema Malini as a village tonga (horse carriage) driver in '*Sholay*' and the general manager of a company in '*Trishul*', Rakhee as corporate secretary in '*Trishul*' and a doctor in '*Kala Pathar*', Vidya Sinha who works in a private firm in '*Chhoti Si Baat*').^v The working woman vanished from the popular blockbusters of the nineties which relegated Indian women to the boundary of the home. The concern boils down to the embodiment of women who stay next door, walk on the street, spend time working in office and return home after a tiring day. Where are these women in Hindi films?

In an era of information overload, it is not too radical to expect some social consciousness from the cinema medium. All this while, there has been discussion about media's responsibility to the society. So why cinema should be engaged only with creating leisure for its audience and not make them think critically? Popular rhetoric and culture need to be challenged and cinema can do it effectively if it exhibits some sensitivity to gender issues. This is because Hindi films now enjoy a huge international market in many South Asian and Western countries. Thereby, operating in a larger frame-work like this calls for a portrayal of women which is not only accurate but also just to the cause of women empowerment.

From the Gender lens

The narratives of Hindi cinema have undoubtedly been male dominated and male centric. Themes have been explored from the male audience's point of view. The heroine is always secondary to the hero. Her role is charted out in context of any male character which is central to the script. It may be the hero, the villain, the father, the boss, an elderly male figure etc. She is devoid of any independent existence and her journey throughout the film is explored in relation to the male character. This kind of straight-jacketing limits the women's role to providing glamour, relief, respite and entertainment. For eg: *Priyanka Chopra's* character in *Agneepath* (2012) is not of any significance to the story as such. It is only to give the audience a break from the tedious scenes of violence and drama. She is there only as a romantic partner to *Hrithik Roshan* who is busy in avenging his father's brutal murder. Chronicling the male's experiences, dreams, stories, revenge, angst, ambitions etc has been the essence of Hindi films. In the action genre of films popularized by the likes of *Akshay Kumar, Sunny Deol and Sunil Shetty*; the heroine is abruptly placed in the romantic track as a distraction for the viewer from monotonous bouts of violence. It is unusual to witness a strong female character in an action movie even if she indulges in some fights and punches. Where are the *Charlie's Angels* of *Bollywood* (2000) and where can we find a character that Angelina Jolie played in *SALT* (2010)? *Bollywood* has so far dished out such female characters that the audience has almost been tamed into accepting women in certain kinds of roles only.

Another trend to be examined in the depiction of female characters is the clear dichotomy which is followed. The woman is docile, domestic, honourable, noble, and ideal or she is the other extreme – wayward, reckless and irresponsible. Why does *Bollywood* shy away from taking the middle path? Where are women who are good or bad as per the situation they face in their lives? Where are the women who negotiate with troubles on a daily basis and emerge victorious? In David Dhawan's *Biwi no.1* (1999), the wife played by *Karishma Kapoor* is shown to have sacrificed her successful career to experience domesticated bliss with her husband *Salman Khan*. When the husband strays, it is the other woman (*Sushmita Sen*) who is blamed for the same and is demonized all through the film. The husband is absolved of adultery and he returns to his legitimate partner i.e. the wife at the end of the story. The significance of the title i.e. *Biwi no.1* is because the wife is successful in bringing the husband back to the domestic arena – seen as the victory of the 'traditional' (wife) over the 'modern' (mistress/vamp). Such a portrayal has strong moral connotations associated with it. It also shows how two women are pitted against each other to win over the same man, while he enjoys his fling openly.

The 'man' as the saviour and the 'woman' as the victim are also prominently seen in Hindi cinema discourse. The heroine is a damsel in distress who has to be rescued by the hero if she is in trouble. Scene after scene of heroes rescuing their ladies from the clutches of villains have been captured by the camera. In recently released *Ra-One* (2011), the film's poster clearly depicts the hero (*Shahrukh Khan*) carrying the leading lady, *Kareena Kapoor* in his arms. It builds up his image as her saviour, something which the film's story too follows. The woman of substance is missing from such portrayals, the women who can lead her life independently and take decisions without relying on any male. In such a scenario, women are seen to be not just physically inferior to men but also intellectually inferior. Film-makers don't take the effort to associate qualities like intellect and decision-making with female characters.

On the positive side, there are a chunk of film-makers who have reacted against the stereotypes set by mainstream cinema and have dared to explore subjects from the women's perspective. Contemporary films like *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Cheeni Kum* (2007), *Chameli* (2003), *Ishqiya* (2010), *Paa* (2009) and *Dirty Picture* (2011) have pictured extraordinary themes and portrayed women as central to the story line. These films have forced creators to take a fresh look at the different roles played by women and introspect into the kind of typecast that was being perpetuated earlier. It is also to the credit of the current crop of actresses who have not been hesitant to accept bold roles. Actresses like *Vidya Balan* (*Paa*, *Dirty Picture*, *Kahani*, *Ishqiya*) and *Konkona Sen Sharma* (*Page 3*, *Wake Up Sid*, *Life in a Metro*, *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*) have led this change of direction. Other actresses like *Jaya Bachchan*, *Smita Patil*, *Shabana Azmi* and *Nandita Das* have also appeared in strong and independent roles which for the time being shifted the camera's focus from the women's body to her identity as an individual. Such actresses have challenged the norm.

Film scholar and author *Shoma Chatterji* (*Subject: Cinema, Object: Women, 1998*) says, "Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects with rarely any sense of agency being imparted to them. Each phase of Hindi cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal frame-work of the Indian society. The ordinary woman has hardly been visible in Hindi cinema."^{vi} To understand this portrayal in much more depth, we need to have a look at some crucial glimpses which defined the role of women in Hindi films. These images kept alive the notions of women as upholders of traditions, family bonding, thus depriving them of any sense of power and agency.

Glimpses

The decade of the nineties in Hindi cinema was one which popularized the genre of family drama. There were several family films which went on to become blockbusters and which reinforced the patriarchal values of the Indian society. Directors like *Sooraj Barjatya* and *Karan Johar* were at the forefront of such films. These films also appealed to migrant Indians staying abroad because through them they were to connect to their roots and culture. Such family oriented films essentially talked about family bonding and has women playing larger than life roles centred around values like love, care, discipline, obedience etc. Eg: *Kajol in Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*

(KKHH), *Madhuri Dixit in Hum Aapke Hain Kaun (HAHK) and Dil To Pagal Hai (DTPH)*, *Jaya Bachchan in Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham (KKKG)*³.

While women were very much important characters in these films, their identities were absent from the film's text. Their roles were defined in relation to their family especially the male characters in the family. Most of these films also laid down the conditions for ideal womanhood. In a research work on "*Cinema and Society: Reflection of Patriarchal Values in selected Hindi Blockbusters*" (*Mukta Chakravorty, 2002*), the researcher has tried to study the relationship between patriarchal values and popular cinema and how such values get reinforced through this medium. She talks about HAHK (1994), in which the main protagonist (*Nisha*) and her sister *Pooja* are shown to be a computer scientist and a painter respectively. Ironically though, they are never shown to be in their work place. They mostly occupy the house and the kitchen. Even though they are modern and confident women, they submit to the desires of their family and are eventually domesticated. This was an indication of an era which saw the educated and economically independent women as insensitive and uncaring thus concluding that women are successful only in nurturing roles.^{vii} A woman in this film is seen only as one who can cook, not earn for the family. It also shows that ideal women will always put 'duty before love' and family before individual', shown in *Nisha* sacrificing her love for the sake of family.

In *Hum Saath Saath Hain (1999)*, story of a typical Indian joint family, the younger to-be daughter-in-law of the house (*Sonali Bendre*) is a doctor by profession. However, she is never shown in a professional set up. Instead she is the coy, traditional kind of a girl who dutifully obeys her would be in-laws and subscribes to 'Indianness'. Her family identity dominates her professional identity. In films such as these, the 'homely' role of the women was reinforced by use of symbols like 'mangalsutra', 'sindoor' and elaborate wedding customs. The modern woman was seen as a threat to the hierarchical family structure and was hence during the course of the film transformed into a simple and sacrificing wife/partner.

In what emerged as a cult film for youngsters, *KKHH (1998)*, *Rahul (Shahrukh Khan)* is a flirtatious young guy who though does not mind flirting with girls, would however want to take only a homely girl in front of his mother, for marriage. While it is completely alright for him to flirt, he has very clear ideas about whom he wants to marry and that the girl should be simple. His best friend *Anjali (Kajol)* who is a tomboy falls for him and makes every effort to woo him by turning herself to be girlish. Under the veils of opulence, wealth, gloss, glamour and larger than life sets, all these films did were to reinforce patriarchy. These films also set different codes of conduct for men and women. So while *Rahul* in the beginning of the film believes that love and marriage can happen only once, he ends up marrying twice! This is not for the woman who has to stick to one partner.

Such differences can also be observed in the treatment provided to the theme of 'adultery' by films like *Gharwali Baharwali (1998)* and *Biwi no.1 (1998)*. In the former there is open support to bigamy on part of the husband for production of an heir, whereas in the later, the husband (*Salman Khan*) indulges in an extra-marital affair while disallowing his wife (*Karishma Kapoor*) to wear skimpy clothes and dance in front of other men. In *Murder (2004)*, *Mallika Sherawat's* adultery is shown as unpardonable and the husband (*Ashmit Patel*) is shown to be large-hearted to forgive it.

In films that catered to Indian migrants, there was a clear emphasis on superiority of Indianness over western culture. The Indian was shown to be pure whereas the western was the morally degraded. This duality was established through the conduct of female characters like *Kajol* in *Dilwali Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (DDLJ) – 1995*, *Pardes (1997)* and *Aa Ab Laut Chalen (1999)*. The western woman in these films was shown to be morally degraded and inferior to the Indian woman, whom the hero eventually chose. The migrant Indians in these films decided to retain their Indian values at any cost.^{viii} In DDLJ, *Kajol* is seen in western attire while travelling in Europe, but the moment she enters her homeland i.e. *Punjab*, she dresses in traditional salwar-kameez. In the same film, *Shahrukh Khan* tells *Kajol* that he will not run away and marry her because even

³ From here on, in the paper, abbreviations will be used to denote these films.

though he has been brought up in a foreign land, he has still retained his *Indian sanskars*. In *Aa Ab Laut Chalen*, Akshay Khanna eventually chooses Aishwarya Rai over the western woman who he had been chasing.

There are many other examples of gender bias on screen and they are not limited to a particular era of films. For eg: in war movies across time, women have been relegated to lovers who keep waiting endlessly for men fighting war. The courtesan, a subject of examination in many Hindi films (*Devdas*, *Umrao Jaan*, *Pakeezah*, *Chameli*), is a character that evokes sympathy from the hero. The hero will fall for her; but will never marry her because the purity of the institution of marriage does not allow this union. Even if the marriage happens, the ground for it is sympathy. In *Hamara Dil Aapke Paas Hai* (2000), Aishwarya Rai is rape victim who finds sympathy and love in Anil Kapoor, who shelters her after the incident. As she falls in love with his, she tries to combine multiple roles of a girlfriend, wife and mother to his kids to win his love. In *Vivaah* (2006), Amrita Rao is a young, docile, submissive, suppressed but ideal girl chosen by Shahid Kapoor for marriage. The reason for his choice is the ideal qualities that she possesses. The hero's magnanimity is depicted in the end as he willingly accepts her after a tragic accident that takes place just before marriage.

It is necessary to understand that such portrayals find rationale in the power structures that govern Indian society. These power structures do not impart any agency to women. The inclination to portray women as ideal stems from the social and cultural context in which we reside. The pre-occupation with the ideal is what defines the goals of Hindi cinema. This ideal allows for only two types of women characters – the good who is to be idealized and the bad who is to be demonized. Most films still cannot sum up the courage to shatter myths of feminine beauty embodied by fair skin, curvaceous figure and glamorous make-up. On her visit to Vadodara's M.S. University to discuss the Indian obsession with fairness, acclaimed actress Nandita Das recalled her experience of being a dark skinned actress in an industry dominated by fair heroines. She admitted that even as make-up men and directors of her films wanted her to appear fair on screen, she resisted.⁴ A dark-skinned heroine, a heroine without make-up or an over-weight heroine may just not be accepted by the audience.

Contemporary cinema has attempted to explore taboo subjects like sexuality, infidelity, surrogacy, divorce, live-in relations etc through movies like *Jism*(2003), *Astitva* (2000), *Salaam Namaste* (2005) etc. For eg: *Chak De India* (2007) talks about the conflicts that women face when they decide to excel in the field chosen by them. In the movie's case the field is sports. The sportswomen in the movie are shown to negotiate these conflicts and not be morally upright by choosing family over career. They are not super-women; they are just normal beings who are able to decide their priorities. This portrayal is no mean achievement of Hindi cinema. *Astitva* (2000) has been pitched as a film which explores the unconventional, the desires of a married woman who has long been neglected by her husband. The film is a revelation in the sense that it makes a strong statement about the hypocrisy in the society. The film questions the realm of patriarchy which may not necessarily commit violence but manifest domination in other forms like denial of space and freedom and subjugation. The society needs to accept these forms as patriarchal domination and not just focus on violence. The protagonist Aditi (*Tabu*) emerges in the end as a strong woman with her own thoughts who rather than seeking forgiveness from her husband, chooses to walk out and live life on her own terms. Another film which shatters the myth of the patriarchal system as the protector of women's honour is *Mirch Masala* (1987). Patriarchy has been totally debunked when the village men who are supposed to guard *Sonbai's* (*Smita Patil*) honour, instead agree to trade it for the sake of the village's safety. So, *Sonbai* has to depend on herself for protection from the *subedar*.^{ix} It reinforces the notion of honour being associated with the woman's body.

In a bid to reach the masses, popular cinema has become melodramatic and rhetorical. The presentation of extremes has been common. So, while films from the earlier era showed women as extremely submissive and docile, recent releases like *Rockstar* (2011) have resorted to heroines who are bold, uninhibited, skimpily clad, and promiscuous. This ultimately does not lead to the empowerment of the women character; it only reduces her

⁴ The author visited this discussion held at the M.S. University of Baroda and hence says so from personal recall of the event.

to a prop to satisfy the male audience. These are images which subtly promote the stereotype and resort to regression. In *Munni, Sheila and Chkini Chameli* (popular item numbers from recent movies like *Dabang, Tees Maar Khan and Agneepath* respectively), we find the denigration of women being emphasized vehemently. The female body, the male gaze, voyeurism – all of which popular cinema relies on are present in these item numbers. They are only an addition to the package of entertainment that the movie is supposed to provide. They even act to enhance the repeat value of the film, sometimes being promoted more than the movie itself. Movies also set in certain trends that can be easily picked by women as desirable. Eg: *Kareena Kapoor's* size zero in *Tashan* (2008). What implications these can have on young women in our society is a matter of larger debate.

Women in Realistic Cinema

Realistic cinema is different from popular cinema in the way that it takes inspiration for its subjects from real life situations and existing circumstances in the society. Though, it may apparently fall in the realm of popular cinema, its approach and treatment of characters is more convincing than popular cinema. It is interesting to examine some films from this brand of cinema which is becoming popular among audiences. This type of cinema combines popular appeal and critical acclaim. Movies like *Black Friday* (2004), *Udaan* (2010), *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (2010), *Akrosh* (2010) etc can be listed under this type of cinema. The portrayal of women in these movies which are not aiming to be commercial pot-boilers but want to present a real experience to the audience is a subject of inquiry in this part of the paper. For the purpose of specificity and clarity, *Madhur Bhandarkar's* films have been selected for analysis. *Bhandarkar's* cinema is associated with gritty realism. He falls into the brigade of contemporary Hindi film-makers who have filmed real time issues and have been appreciated for the same. He has also been the recipient of many National Film Awards for his work on social issues. His films have dealt with bold and unconventional themes like exploitation of women, cycle of poverty, organized crime, police and govt. corruption, cult of celebrity and journalism, ruthlessness of big business and industrial espionage.⁵ Majority of his films had female protagonists.

The females in *Bhandarkar's* films are usually shown as bold and empowered women who lead life on their own terms, take their own decisions, are 'rebels' who don't conform to social norms and excel in their respective professions. A very positive portrayal of an independent leading lady characterizes the initial reels of his films. However, through the progress of the film mid-way, there is a downslide in the protagonist's assertion and she slowly gets inclined to fit in the society's mould. In the end, she either has to fit in the norm or end up as a sufferer. There is a subtle reinforcement of the very value system that the film critiques at its outset. His films have been disparaged for being too judgmental by giving lessons on morality to the viewer.

In *Satta* (2003), *Bhandarkar* tells the story of *Anuradha* who is a middle class working woman accidentally entering the murky world of politics. In the beginning, *Anuradha* is an educated and confident working woman who gives up her career after marriage. This questions the rationale of empowerment. Why did she agree to sacrifice her career for marrying a budding politician? Again she enters politics by default and not by choice. She is forced to make a political career for the sake of her family and her husband who is languishing in prison for a heinous crime committed by him. Thus, politics is not her first choice. There is no sign of protest when her family members ask her to contest elections in place of her husband. There is a mere conformity which goes against *Anuradha's* independent nature depicted before the marriage takes place. In her political journey, *Anuradha* is guided by the family's political mentor (*Atul Kulkarni*). The message conveyed is that women have no knowledge of politics and they are guided in political action by either their family or mentors. Would it make some difference to the film, if she had emerged as a female leader who survives and succeeds on her own? For a woman to be a successful politician; is her own merit not enough? Does she need a man to be by her side? In the

⁵ Filmography includes *Trishakti* (1999), *Chandani Bar* (2001), *Satta* (2003), *Aan – Men at Work* (2004), *Page 3* (2005), *Corporate* (2006), *Traffic Signal* (2007), *Fashion* (2008), *Jail* (2009), *Dil Toh Baccha Hai Ji* (2011) and the current under-production venture titled *Heroine*.

course of their political affiliation, *Anuradha* is shown to fall for her mentor. Could we not have an unattached woman who is just demonstrating her leadership skills? These concerns about protagonist's portrayal betray *Anuradha's* initial determination, strength and presence.

Corporate (2006) weakens an interesting premise based on gender and business. While *Nishigandha Dasgupta (Bipasha Basu)*, is a successful corporate executive with the 'Sehgal Group of Companies', she is also a dutiful lover to *Ritesh Sahani (Kay Kay Menon)*. She wants her lover to look successful in front of everybody in the company. For this, she prepares a report which is presented by him and for which he receives the credit. This is in contrast to *Nishigandha's* spirited and ambitious attitude. She has climbed up the corporate ladder and her career means a lot to her. Still, she prioritizes her responsibilities towards her lover over her career. She is shown to be taking up unethical activities in business and these are justified as she does them for the sake of love. In the end, she willingly takes up the blame for a fiasco that the company is involved in. She ends up being the sole accused sent to jail. Her rationality is secondary to her love whereby she is ready to be accused of a crime she hasn't committed. The portrayal of *Nishigandha's* decisions during the crisis period reinforces that women are not capable to think rationally and they will readily sacrifice not only their lives but also their reputation for the person they love. Though, she is a successful and intelligent business-woman, she falls prey to the corporate tussle and covert business tactics where all characters other than her are absolved of morality. In the battle for supremacy in the corporate world, *Nishi* is a loser.

Meghna's is a story of a good girl in a bad fashion world (*Fashion, 2008*). A small town girl enters the world of glitz and glamour with dreams to fulfill. She defies her parents to pursue her ambitions. As expected, middle-class parents don't want their daughter to become a model. They want her to conform to societal norms. *Meghna* defies. She is shown to be a hard working professional who is determined to make it big. But she needs a man for it. Enter *Abhjit Sarin (Arbaaz Khan)* who makes her a show-stopper as well as the mother of his child. A relationship which could have been shown as purely professional becomes a personal and emotional one as *Sarin* uses *Meghna*. But she is also using him for her success, a point which the film never raises. In a scene from the film, when she becomes pregnant, *Meghna* tells *Sarin* that she wants to keep the child. This is a sudden invocation of *Meghna's* womanly side. All this while, she has been a career-oriented ambitious woman and this sudden motherly instinct comes as a surprise.^x On her failure, *Meghna* fails to maintain composure and ends up doing all the morally degraded things that are common in the fashion world (drunken driving, having sex with a stranger). She is portrayed more as a victim than a person who has struggled to carve her own destiny. The portrayal of the other two female models in the film also suggests signs of victimhood (*Mugdha Godse's* marriage of convenience to a gay designer and *Kangana Ranaut's* subjugation in front of her boyfriend). In the end when *Meghna* successfully returns to the fashion world, it seems more of a moral vindication than an assertion of her grit.

While *Bhandarkar's* films are an appreciative attempt to bring to us, strong female characters, he still chooses to let them be in the larger societal frame-work. His characters though give a shot at defiance; they are not made to move out of the restricted sphere of action. An analysis of other films made by him i.e. *Page 3, Chandani Bar, Traffic Signal, Jail* etc may bring to light the deficiencies in his portrayal. It is also worth noting that after such a stint of realistic films, *Bhandarkar* in 2011 filmed a conventional romantic comedy '*Dil Toh Baccha Hai Ji*'.

Celluloid Women – Conclusion

It is difficult to come to a uniform conclusion on the portrayal of celluloid women. Considering the fact that women in India are not a homogenous group – they belong to different religions, castes, class, socio-economic status and have different kinds of ambitions and desires as a result of which they lead different lives, it is improper to conclude that women on Indian silver screen have been portrayed in an identical manner. The portrayal of course has to be sensitive to the category to which they belong. For eg: An urban middle class woman's story would be entirely different from that of a woman in a village. Films, thus have to be responsive towards the context in which they locate women characters. Women characters should possess agency to dismantle the existing power structures as well as be able to negotiate their own position within this structure. It is time that cinema seeks a redefinition of women as objects of male gaze. Women's experiences and dilemmas

as points of narration are the need of the hour. Going beyond the stereotypes will do a great help to the cause of women in Indian society. Cinema has to create a separate and independent space for Indian women to help them realise their dreams. Cinema's only end is not to entertain. It must begin a quest for social change through entertainment. As a media product, identified to accelerate the process of modernity, cinema should not stick to the 'formula film'⁶; it should come up with more progressive representations of women. Such portrayals would do justice to women and their role in the society.

References

-
- ⁱ Joseph, A., & Sharma, K. (1994). *Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues* (pp. 21). New Delhi, Sage Publications.
- ⁱⁱ Gokulsing, K.M., & Dissanayake, W. (1998). *Indian Popular Cinema: A narrative of cultural change*. (pp. 88). U.K., Trentham Books Limited.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jain, J., & Rai, S. (2009). *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*. (pp. 10). Jaipur, Rawat Publications.
- ^{iv} *Cinema and the Mirror*. Retrieved March 14, 2012 from <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Independent-Film-Road-Movies/Psychoanalysis-CINEMA-AND-THE-MIRROR.html>
- ^v *Bollywood's 'homely' heroines*. Retrieved March 3, 2012 from <http://www.indiatogether.org/2003/sep/wom-heroines.htm>
- ^{vi} *Role of Women in Indian Cinema*. Retrieved March 5, 2012 from <http://oorvazifilmeducation.wordpress.com/2010/10/08/interview-with-shoma-chatterji-role-of-women-in-indian-cinema/>
- ^{vii} Chakravorty, M. (2002). *Cinema and Society: Reflection of Patriarchal Values in selected Hindi Blockbusters*. Unpublished Masters Dissertation of the Faculty of Journalism & Communication, The M.S.University of Baroda.
- ^{viii} Datta, S. (2000). *Globalization and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema*. *Social Scientist*, Vol. 28, No. 3/4, (March. – Apr., 2000), pp 71-82 Retrieved March 5, 2012 from www.jstor.org/stable/3518191?origin=JSTOR-pdf
- ^{ix} Bagchi, A. (1996). *Women in Indian Cinema*. Retrieved March 5, 2012 from <http://www.cs.jhu.edu/~bagchi/women.html>
- ^x Basu, S. (2008). *Feminist Film Review: 'Fashion' and other Bhandarkar Flicks*. Retrieved March 3, 2012 from <http://sanjukta.wordpress.com/2008/11/02/fashion-movie-review/>

Author: Ms. Nidhi Shendurnikar Tere is a Junior Research Fellow at the Department of Political Science, M.S.University of Baroda (Gujarat). She is currently pursuing Ph.D in '*Mediation of Conflict between India-Pakistan and the Role of the Press and New Media*'. She cleared the National Eligibility Test (NET) in Journalism and Mass Communication, conducted by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2009. She has presented papers on 'Mass Media and Indian Languages', 'Mass Media and Global Security' and 'Right to Information Act and the Press in Gujarat' at national and state level seminars. Her areas of research interest are Media and Right to Information Act, Political Communication, Media and Conflict Resolution, Media and Gender, Politics and Indian Cinema, Indian Press and Development. Address: 15/B, Vitthalbaug Society, Near Deep Chambers, Manjalpur, Vadodara – 390011, Gujarat, India

⁶ Formula Film signifies the adherence to a particular type of story-line, characters, plot, sequences etc in a film which would eventually be a guarantee for commercial success