



## EMPOWERMENT OR EM'PAWN'MENT: SUBTLE DISCOURSES IN INDIAN WOMEN CENTRIC CINEMA

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### ABSTRACT:

Cinema is a potent and popular medium of entertainment that has, since its inception, been most easily and widely accessed by public. Naturally, as one of the discourse making artefacts, cinema mirrors the prevalent socio-cultural values and affects them too. In this context, it has always been a topic of debate how woman is represented on the celluloid. Though, a woman is as quintessential to the medium as a man but she has been subject to certain stereotypes and mostly her role has been either as an object of male fantasy or promotor of patriarchal values. This paper will try to unearth certain nuances regarding the presentation of woman in Indian cinema and whether there has been a change or the stereotyping of woman remains intact with the evolvement of the medium. The main focus of the paper would be on the so called, 'Woman Centric Cinema' that supposedly begs to differ in its presentation of woman and woman related issues. Has this particular genre achieved what it aims for would be taken into account by analyzing some landmark films of this genre?

The scope of enquiry being too large, the paper will focus only on the Hindi film industry and would consider only a few selected films as the sample. The paper will also take into account the recent developments in the cinematic medium like Web series and how these have introduced certain novelties regarding representation of woman.

**Keywords:** Cinema, objectification, gaze, semiotics, women representation

Cinema is a polysemic matrix. Unlike other cultural texts which are generally one-dimensional and need an active imagination of their reader to read between the lines, cinema is a multidimensional 'meaning-generating' complex where each actant, be it the director, the editor,

the actors, the camera person, or any other from technical department, impart their layer of meaning and thus creating a montage of moving images and sounds.

A spectator watching a movie in a theatre is captivated by the rapidly moving train of scenes and very little is left for his/her imagination to work upon. Thus, in a sense, cinema remains one of the most satisfying mediums that is absolutely consumed by the gullible spectators like a child spoon-fed with the choice of its parents.

With such a rich texture of meaning, cinema naturally proves to be a powerful tool of discourse making and promotion. Its wide appeal, easy and relatively cheaper access and continuously evolving techniques have made it the most sought-after medium of entertainment. In this context, it is not much surprising to find that cinema also follow the unwritten laws of the social cultural environment in which it is produced.

Laura Mulvey has explained that the patterns of the patriarchal or the male dominated society have also influenced the structures of films. She calls woman as the bearer of the meaning but not the one who can make the meaning as woman is dominated by a patriarchal language as well as society. Though there has been development on the technical grounds in the field of cinema but on the representational grounds it could not escape the restricted approach where woman as represented as they are treated in the society. Cinema becomes an art form where women become objects of 'male-gaze' and her main role id to satisfy the extreme voyeurism among the male viewers.

And when it comes to the representation of women in Indian, particularly Hindi cinema, the case is not different. Both in front of and behind the camera, the rules defined and deputed to women are in most cases fixed and stereotyped. If we talk about women as producer of a cinematic text-women working as director, script writer, editor or camera person, traditionally they are discouraged from donning such roles because of the pervasive impression that women filmmakers present a sort of financial risk. A film created by a female director doesn't create that pre-buzz but rather its market value is depreciated by the mere mention of a female at the helm of the things.

Now Women-centric films are supposed to be different from other films in the very same concept that these films bring women to the limelight in the male dominated society. These films bring poise among women and place them at equilibrium to the male members of the society. There have been many films produced in this genre including 'Mother India' (Mehboob Khan 1957), 'Andhi' (Gulzar 1957), 'Arth' (Mahesh Bhatt 1982), 'Mirch Masala' (Ketan Mehta 1987), 'Chandani Bar' (Madhur Bhandarkar 2001), 'No One killed Jessica' (2011), 'Astitva' (2000), 'The Dirty Picture' (2011) etc. These films revolve around the stories of women and present a wide range of issues pertaining to women as well as an array of roles played by women in them.

Though, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century more and more women filmmakers have made their niche in the business still if we look at the Indian cinema only, there are just a few names like Farah Khan and Joya Akhtar that have been able to pass the litmus test of commercial success. With movies like 'Main Hoon Na' and 'Happy New year', Farah Khan performed the rare feat for a woman director creating box-office success.

In the domain of Arts Cinema there is a much better scenario. If we looked at last few decades names like Kalpana Lajmi ['Ek Pal', 'Rudali'], Mira Nair ['Salaam Bombay!', 'Monsoon Wedding'], Aparna Sen ['36 Chowringhee Lane', 'Mr. and Mrs. Iyer', 'The Japanese Wife'], Deepa Mehta['Fire', 'Earth', 'Water'], Gauri Shinde['English Vinglish'], Shonali Bose ['Margarita with a Straw'] Meghna Gulzar ['Filhaal', 'Raazi', 'Chappak'], Nandita Das ['Firaaq', 'Manto'] Alankrita Shrivastava ['Lipstick Under My Burkha', 'Bombay Begums'] have left a lasting impact with their impressive work.

Still, one can't ignore the fact, barring a few exceptions, most of these directors have a strong backup system or some government funded agency that financially helped them to put their vision on the celluloid. Even when a woman filmmaker takes command behind the camera, she has a male-dominated crew at her hand because of the scarcity of women technicians. The crew once again create a sort of obstacle as they are not in habit of taking instructions from a woman. This results in the compromise of the quality for which once again the director is held responsible. Thus, the vicious circle goes on, making the entry of women behind the camera

more and more difficult.

When we consider woman in the front of the camera, she is indeed an integral part from the beginning as a typical story demands a heroine. However, over the course of decades, she has rarely gotten any substantial role. Though, she is there on the screen in various avatars, but her role is almost always on the fixed lines...caring/scheming mother, doting/jealous wife, loyal/astray daughter. According to the senior actor Shabana Azmi, the change in the female characters is only a cosmetic change as women characters later appeared to be fighting the society with leather pants and pistol in hand most of the time against rape. The change of role did not bear much change in the overall representation of women in real life as they were still the victims.

To try to decipher the evolution of woman representation over the years, it would be befitting to consider some of the landmark and epoch marking woman centric films. The credit of first woman centric film generally goes to Mother India [1957] directed by Mehboob Khan which was actually the remake of his earlier movie 'Aurat' (1940). Mother India was a commercial success and created history by reaching the last round of movies nominated for the Oscars. There were many elements in the movie that were typical of the contemporary Indian Cinema: theme of poverty ridden peasants doubly exploited by the vagaries of monsoon and exorbitant interest rates by the money lenders. Then, there was a quintessential rebel who took the law into his hands and avenging for the atrocities done by the Sahukar class by forming a gang of dacoits.

There was also typical binary of good ideal son pitched against the strayed son doing his best to force him to mend his ways. However, what made the movie iconic was the role of the mother Radha, played impressively by Nargis, who undergoes all the adverse circumstances: draught ridden fields, death of the husband, rearing up of two young mouths and facing the leering seducing words of the local moneylender, Lala. She stays strong and stoic only to find that her younger son Birju, played by Sunil Dutt, becomes a rebel. Initially, she copes with his errant ways always trying to rectify him, however, when Birju abducts a girl from her marriage mandap, she, after warning him again and again, kills him by firing a bullet.

A mother taking the life of her own son for the sake of the honor of another woman was indeed a bravura effort and was applauded round the world. The film still remains a landmark work that portrays a strong woman who faces all sorts of adverse circumstances and still remains capable to choose the right over the wrong even if it means killing her own beloved son.

Marriage and woman's position in the marital contract has always been a favorite haunt of Indian film makers. The various shades of this age-old institution have been captured and represented in an evolving manner. In the initial phase of Indian cinema, marriage was a sacrosanct artifact whose piousness was maintained by a responsible husband and an obedient wife. Most of the social movies were woven around the prescribed norms of society that further endorsed those values that keep woman in their home territory.

The 1982 Mahesh Bhatt's 'Arth' is in many ways a new signature in Indian cinema as it portrayed two women, both at suffering end and at the hand of the same man, meeting their destinies in contrasting manner. Pooja, played brilliantly by the flagbearer of the Parallel cinema, Shabana Azmi, is married to Inder, a successful film director. Inder, however, is having an affair with Kavita, an actress. When, Inder breaks the news to Pooja, initially she is shell shocked and her illusions regarding marriage and home fall like pack of cards.

She decides to move out of the home and starts living in a girl hostel where she meets an aspiring singer Raj. She also takes responsibility of bringing up the girl child of her maid, another woman who is a victim of domestic violence. Gradually, she comes to her own and creates an identity for herself and even when Inder apologize and asks her to return, she refuses.

On the other, extreme, Kavita, played by thespian Smita Patil, first suffers from insecurity and forces Inder to tell Pooja about their relationship. Later, when Pooja moves out, she begins to suffer from the guilt burden and gradually loses her grip on her sanity. Her schizophrenia completely breaks her down and she also leaves Inder.

Thus, the two women in the movie, apparently on opposite ends, suffer at the hands of patriarchal code of conduct. A man can have casual, serious or one night stand with other women without remorse while a wife should always be duty bound. On the other hand, a woman is

treated as a home breaker, if she has a relationship with a married man and all the blame falls on her. Inder makes home for Pooja, Kavita Breaks the perfect home, so Inder goes scot free.

Another interesting fact to notice, not only in this movie but many other later movies also, is that when a woman is shown addicted to drink or smoke, she is always portrayed in the negative light while on the other hand, a hero can easily be a smoker, a drinker without carrying the tag of being a negative character. Similarly, most movies that seriously tackle the extra marital issue show that the home breaker woman either commits suicide or loses her mental balance in the end. It may be due to the guilty conscious or the burden of societal pressure, the woman is put under heavy scanner resulting in a blow on her nerves.

In the similar context, one should also underline the treatment of the theme of extra marital affair in toto. Most of the movies treat it light heartedly, the man has an affair, not due to lust or prurient desires, but because of some unavoidable circumstances, and even in some cases just to save the life of a damsel in distress. In the end, some movies go on the extent of allowing the man to keep both, 'Gharwali' and 'Baharwali' as if he is doing a favor to both of them. The commercial success of movies like, 'Pati, Patni aur Wo', 'Gharwali Baharwali', 'Biwi No. 1', 'Masti', 'No Entry' 'Do Not Disturb' 'Kis Kis Se Pyar Karu' shows how Indian audience, including both man and woman, relish and approve of such treatment. In fact, infidelity on the part of man is always forgiven by the loving wife in the end with a halfhearted warning to never go stray again.

More important than this stereotyping of roles is the narrative set by them that is in complete assonance with the dominant patriarchal ideology- a wife who should always be large hearted to forgive her husband's silly mistakes. Umpteen movies, in the garb of comedy, present extra marital affairs in which the hero, in the end, always come back home after enjoying his brief stint and the wife generally succumbs to the demand of sacrosanct institution of marriage.

A very strange occurring with this genre is that when the focus is on the infidelity of man, most of the movies are made in comic genre and in a few cases when the focuses is on the serious extramarital relationship by a woman, for example in movies like 'Silsila', 'Arth', 'Kabhi Alvida

Na Kehna', 'Hamari Adhuri Kahani' there is a tragic end to such plots. It may be the outcome of the dominant ideological thinking that a man can stray because it is a temporary deflection but a woman must stay faithful because there is a point of no return for her.

'Astitva' [2000] by Mahesh Manjrekar takes rather an unusual approach towards the institute of marriage bringing into focus a woman's point of view. The Pandits, Shreekant (Sachin Khedekar) and Aditi (Tabu) have what is termed a 'happy marriage'. A marriage where one spouse makes all the compromises needed to smoothen their lives. Shree is almost oblivious of Aditi's 'astitva' until an incident brings to the surface the great sham their marriage has been. The movie is bravura effort, a gauntlet thrown at the male centric ideology of marriage which is haunted by predetermined gender roles, banishing women as an object to be treated according to the will and whims of the men.

Reversing the formula, the wife is shown to have a sexual encounter with someone outside her marriage, which is purely circumstantial, and when the husband comes to know about this almost three decades later, his ego is not able to handle it. It is one of those rare movies which do not offer a cheesy solution to the problem of casual or extra marital relationship, but rather show the inefficacy of the institute of marriage to come up with a balanced relationship.

In the 1970s and 80s, the cinema of young people breaking bars created sensation, movies that questioned the rigid boundaries of the institute of marriage. But again, the woman in these so-called urban Arts movies were mere show pieces displaying their bodies as signifier of liberty rather than actually enjoying the freedom of choice.

Another point to be noted regarding the representation of woman in cinema is their portrayal in so called Superhero movies. It is a popular genre and the characters from both the western cinema and the Indian cinema have become cultural icons specially among the young adults. Be it franchise like Avengers or DC comics, people flock to see the movies of these Superheroes. In the Hollywood, we may still find three of four women playing the part of a superhero, like Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Cat Woman and Black widow, Indian cinema has yet to witness its first woman superhero movie. It seems an ironical fact that a land which worship

for 9 days the Nine forms of Adi Shakti twice a year, our scriptwriters and film producers have not been able to work out a single movie portraying a woman having superpowers.

Even in this connection, we take a look at the movies that have a woman Supercop, we would find that the movie goers are somehow titillated by the very idea of a woman kicking the goons in her body-hugging, curve-emphasizing uniform. Though, there have been some earnest attempt to portray a real life and blood cop, Like Tabu in 'Drishyam' but the spectators are more interested in watching Bipasha Basu or Katrina Kaif playing cop who can also hop the pole dance on occasions.

However, the 21st Century brought new and bold perspective regarding the presentation of woman and woman related issues in cinema. Filmmakers chose to take untrodden paths and depict such women characters that 'transgress' the defined threshold with elan and even with loud announcement of their act of rebellion. As a case, we can take the example of 'Lipstick Under My Burkha' [2106] directed by Alankrita Shrivastava. The movie is unrelenting in its social commentary, unapologetic about the mirror it holds up to Indian patriarchy, and reminds men that women – even those old enough to be their mothers – have sexual desires.

The 'burkha' in the title not only refers to the traditional confinement of woman behind the purdah like some precious jewel, but also all those regressive measures of the male dominated society that never allows a woman to discover, explore and candidly confess their libidinal desires. The movie is set in Bhopal, a quintessential Indian city that abides by the age-old traditions and focus on the lives of four women, Usha Parmar (Ratna Pathak Shah), Rehana Abidi (Plabita Borthakur), Shirin Aslam (Konkona Sensharma) and Leela (Aahana Kumra), neighbors in a congested lower-middle class locality.

All four of them are fighting tooth and nail with their respective exploitation through the hands of putrid prejudice ridden society and values. Each of these women – ranging in age from teens to 50s – longs for a life beyond the one she is now trapped in, each one has reason to be perennially angry and depressed, yet somehow each finds within herself the strength to hope.

However, the most interesting and in some ways the most radical character is that of Usha ji,

fondly known as ‘Bua’ by the whole neighborhood due to her age, who indulges in soft porn novels to somehow satisfy her physical urges.

Another noteworthy quality of the movie is the involvement of women behind the camera also: The writing is credited to Alankrita Shrivastava (story and screenplay), Suhani Kanwar (additional screenplay) and Gazal Dhaliwal (dialogue) and the editing is done by Charu Shree Roy.

The movie brings a brazen freshness regarding woman perspective and can be seen as a part of a minor though impactful new wave of woman centric cinema that includes movies like, ‘The Dirty Picture’ [2011], ‘English Vinglish’ [2012], ‘Queen’ [2013] and Leena Yadav’s ‘Parched’ [2016]. All these movies have broken the yoke, rewritten the scripts and presented feisty women confident of their femininity and unequivocal about their desires and ambitions.

A recent development in cinematic presentation is the newly evolved medium of OTT content- ‘Over The Top’ means relaying of a content directly to the subscriber. It is also popularly known as Web series as almost all of them are streamed via internet. As yet there is no regulating body, one can assume the content creator has great liberty in comparison to the traditional medium of cinema or television. This results in a production of daring ventures on subject and with treatment that was never possible in India before. It also allowed the makers to bring niche content as the financial risk factor is now covered in advance and the spectators group is also categorically different.

In this context, we can see a lot of content that has put on the blurred map of woman representation some very starkly visible flags. Issues like marital infidelity, premarital sex, lesbian desire, work-home balance, motherhood, widowhood, ageing, body shaming-all these muted and fringe elements have been brought to the front. Woman never enjoyed such an eminent role on the virtual screen as in the Web series like ‘Pushpavalli’, ‘Delhi Crime’, ‘Ladies Room’, ‘Girl in The City’ and ‘Bombay Begums’ to name a few.

However, it must also be taken into account that this unrestricted medium has also allowed the intense objectification of the female body and also iterative attempts to stereotyping a liberated

woman as a person endorsing casual sex, booze and drug, selfishly career orientated who in the end realizes the perennial value of family life, motherhood and a caring husband.

Thus, the streamlined vogue for NEW woman always has an undercurrent of a patriarchal definition of a GOOD woman. This deliberate attempt by the film fraternity to bespeak on her part and also to tarnish her choice making freedom with fixed cinematic images has not allowed the woman centric cinema into evolving a true medium of her representation. Even most of the so-called woman centric movies apparently toys with the idea of an independent woman within the permitted horizon of cultural expectation. Those that challenge these boundaries are rarely allowed to reach the mass and if they reach, they are rejected firmly and finally. We still have to wait for a cinematic expression that doesn't reek of stale domesticity, much trodden traditional values and sapless identity of stereotyped woman and instead brings to the screen the nuances, spatiality and subtlety of a real woman.

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### **Declaration:**

It is hereby declared that the present paper is an original work and has not been published anywhere else or send for publication.

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