

## Finding Women's Voice in Postcolonial Indian Cinema

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### Abstract

Women have always played a pivotal role in the history of Indian Cinema. Since the inception of Cinema in India, the filmmakers have explored various roles of women for the Indian silver screen. From classic literature to the modern perspectives, Cinema has never found itself wanting when it came to showing women's stories on the screen. However, there came a time when women's role got stereotyped and their position in the social structure of Indian thoughts was frozen. Many though came forward bravely to show their bravery while others got stuck with the typical image of Indian women. Then there came *Realism* in Indian Cinema that tried to recreate a special place for women among the Indian audience. However, with the start of new millennium, we again went back to having weak presence of women in the new generation cinema. This article tries to trace these stages and development. While it historically presents the evolution of the thought, it also brings forward some special moments in the Indian Cinema when women found themselves on the pedestal. The article thus finds the voice of women on the Indian silver screen after the independence.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Women, Voice, Feminism, India.

### Introduction

'Womanhood' has always been considered the core of Indian ethos and way of life. Women possess an indispensable and enviable presence in Indian social life. Since Vedic times, their invaluable relevance has been accepted in our culture with profound respect in our social order. Closely related with her life is the concept of 'motherhood' and it has been viewed as one of the prime duties of a woman. Our religious texts and beliefs present women as 'Powerful Durga Ma', 'Wise Saraswati Ma', and as 'flourishing Lakshmi Ma'. There are traditional, oral and written accounts in plenty to indicate the importance of women in India. A wife is expected to be *saha-dharmini*, who would follow - with her husband - the stages of *grihastha*, *vanaprastha*, and *sannyasa*. The performance of certain religious rites was deemed

invalid if the wife was absent. Women had an equal voice in all matters of life. They participated in all public debates and discussions to voice their views and choices. Marriages were secure and sacred.<sup>1</sup>

However, things started changing for worse for them with the passage of time. The 'Middle Ages' in India was a mass of political confusion due to wars and other destabilizing forces. As a result, appropriate reforms to move towards an egalitarian society did not occur, and women, children, and the needy lost even the little of their remaining rights and privileges. This parochial medieval mindset gave birth to male chauvinism and it continued for centuries beyond the 'Middle Ages', creating a myopic vision whenever the question of emancipating women gained priority. Suppression and exploitation of women in all spheres of life became the order of normal households. This almost silenced their conscience and left them voiceless.

Women in modern India are yet to free themselves from their long-established debased image. The colonial times in India didn't much care about the upliftment of women. However, with the emergence of Anti-Sati laws and Widow Remarriage Act, some hope was offered to end women's plight. Despite such developments, their roles in the freedom struggles have not been credited with equal glories and mentions in Indian history. Since independence in 1947, our constitution has accorded them one and the same honour and rights as citizens. But, the scenario is changing too slowly and it will certainly take some time in reinventing and reimagining the figure of women in our male dominated society.

This article has been written to show how women have been presented in Indian Cinema post independence. Cinema has been the biggest tool to disseminate ideas among large masses. Besides entertaining the common masses, it helps creating awareness regarding national perspectives. Since the birth of Indian cinema in 1913, we have been seeing the changing facades of women on the silver screen. It is indeed wonderful to know how women have evolved through various phases since the independence of our nation. The films clearly show this evolution and record the finding of women's voices in the social and cultural environments of India. Cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian perspectives. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding visual art form could ever achieve. Women have been presented in various roles and some of these roles are stereotyped as mothers, sisters and wives. Very few filmmakers have crossed the line to project them otherwise.

The first notable film that shows the biggest and inerasable image of Indian womanhood is 'Mother India' in 1957. This movie in no time gained a cult status to start discourses on Indian 'womanhood' and 'motherhood'. The country had gained a hard-fought freedom and it needed a strong message to boost the morale of the countrymen. The movie showed 'womanhood' in the most accepted representation by illustrating the self-sacrificing nature of a mother for her family.

Brigitte Schulze, a renowned journalist, while commenting on this aspect of self-sacrificing mother says,

"The audience witnessing the 'Mother India's' plight is reminded of the real life struggles for survival and for meeting one's physical needs. As woman she can be stylized as the abstract potential of recreating life...she is supposed to represent that energizing that connection to the soil 'mother earth'. She is not supposed however to expand this strength on her own but rather only in the context of her functioning in the community, which is the Indian nation, controlled by men." <sup>2</sup>

Postcolonial days were the years in which the newly independent nation was seeking to create itself in its own mould rather than in the orientalist mode of the West. These were also the years of the reimagining of the nation. The concept of 'Mother India' resonated well among the common masses and woman's representation was quickly seen and appreciated in her grandest sacrifice. When the nation was looking for some inspiration and perspectives, the filmmaker Mehboob Khan along with the screen writers Wazahat Mirza and S. Ali Raza created the perfect image of a *Brechtian* mother who would show all courage to save her own. This indeed worked in case of the film 'Mother India'.

Urvashi Butalia, an Indian feminist writer, publisher and activist, well known for her work in the women's movement of India, says that women, as a social issue, have always been present in popular Indian Cinema almost right from the start. Among other things, womanhood, widowhood, dowry and other social evils have seen a lot of presentations on silver screen. The ideology of woman and conscience of gender equality called for some concerns. <sup>3</sup>

Thereafter came several movies which from time to time projected women in the way normal Indians would have loved to see on the silver screen. The role of Sharmila Tagore played in the movied 'Aradhana' is another example of how she would impersonate the role of a mother whose sacrifices knew no bounds. She is the archetypal character of an ideal Indian

wife and mother who should not shy away from making great sacrifices. Woman's identity is written all over the plot of the movie. The movie proved that the social constructs woven around a woman is clearly that of a person who knows nothing but sacrifice and surrender to destiny. She does not seek to find herself but rather wills to see herself subsumed by the grand design already predestined by the deep-rooted norms for an Indian mother and wife. Moini Shifwat presents her case at Indian History Congress, Delhi, 2011 that Cinema in India underlines what is already prevalent in our tradition bound society - that women need to uphold the traditions...and men may generally do whatever they want. <sup>4</sup>

Then there is the famous movie *Deewar* in 1975 by Yash Chopra. In no time, the film caught the imagination of all Indians from all strata of society. The mother in the movie Nirupa Roy had a very powerful pivotal role. Like the mothers in '*Mother India*' and '*Aradhana*' she too struggles with her personal choices. Her two sons present her with '*agnipariksha*' in which she must choose the indispensable - truth over evil. Choosing between her own two sons isn't a very likable task. The screenwriters Saleem Khan and Javed Akhtar have included enough melodrama to make this choice look like a saga of true love. Despite her love for her two sons, the mother is expected to uphold the values of truth and must get rid of her innate motherly emotions. The drama is so staged that mother must bring her wicked son to justice and in this journey her other law-abiding son must help in. The film has been well designed to present a mother who must reign supreme in the struggle to give up her motherly figure to allow truth and justice to prevail. In Short, she was called the 'Goddess-Mother' in the movie. While praising the actress on Nirupa's birth anniversary in 2019, Javed Akhtar added. "When she portrayed the character of Goddess on screen, she looked like a mother and when she used to become mother in films, she always turned out looking like a Goddess." <sup>5</sup>

In post independence Hindi cinema, we constantly see the stereotyped casting of female figures. Following the great conventions of womanhood, the filmmakers do not care to see beyond the perception and keep their heads fixed around the same dynamics of Indian womanhood. As a *devi* she must be dutiful wife and should not look for her own fulfillment. Rather, her *devi*- figure must keep her bound to her husband. Most movies have seen this belief glide through their plots and schemes and audience haven't opposed it either. Perhaps the alternative images would have been shocking and could have spoiled the chances of movies getting successful. While the protagonists were almost always male, the women

usually sang around the flowers and trees and prepared good meal to show her love and loyalty to her partner. The roles of women in the reels matched the ones which were prevalent in the society then. A woman confined within her house was a normal phenomenon and her voices hardly mattered in all matters of life.

Interestingly, '*Rakhi Songs*' are also iconic scenes and parts of Indian cinema. The filmmakers were aware of the fact of the bond which brother and sister share in Indian families. Hence, the representation of brother taking up the responsibility of protecting the dignity of his sister was a sure thing in movies. *Choti Bahen* in 1959 was a classic example which projected brother-sister discourse on silver screen. The sister figure was deemed weak and demure and hence she must be provided with the savior figure of her brother. This connection must be shown through stories in films and it must resonate with the beliefs of the masses. What's more, even the daughters in law need to fall in line with conventional norms. A daughter in law is expected to live her life under the patronage and tutelage of her mother in law. She is left to no choices as she doesn't have one. As long as the mother in law and other elders in the family are alive and around she is to surrender to their whims and fancies. As expected, the filmmakers never forgot to relay this to their screens and thus came movies like *Choti Bahu* in 1971. The director K.B. Tilak with his screenwriter Raj Baldev Raj brought out a melodrama of typical Indian families and proudly showcased the story of women being subservient to male chauvinistic intentions in society. Prem Chowdhary, an Indian social scientist, historian, feminist and Senior Academic Fellow at the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi says that the channelizing of the institution of patriarchy is evidently highlighted normalizing the dominance of elders and mothers in law.<sup>6</sup>

In this entire scenario of Indian cinema, however, we also have some great filmmakers like Shyam Benegal and Kalpana Lajmi who broke away from the well established accepted figures of an average woman in India. In what would become, the metaphors of new age women, these directors and filmmakers tried to walk the different paths. It wasn't easy when mainstream Indian cinema was already gloating over their women being simple sisters, dutiful wives and self-sacrificing mothers. In 1976, Benegal came with *Manthan* in which Smita Patil enacted the great role of women's empowerment. Inspired by the pioneering milk cooperative movement of Verghese Kurien, Benegal teamed up with great Marathi writer Vijay Tendulkar to give voice to Indian women on screen amidst the backdrop of the White

Revolution of India. The movie was a great example of new directions of filmmaking. Benegal's attempt was certainly unique and was quickly observed by the filmgoers. Inspired by his efforts bearing fruits, Benegal again teamed up with Smita Patil to make another women-centric movie '*Bhumika*' in 1977. Not only did the film announce the arrival of an incarnated woman in Indian cinema but it also freed the restrained figure of a household wife and mother. To many, this film was a sudden and abrupt shift from the normal set of things. This paradigm shift was certainly an epoch-making moment in Indian cinema. The identity of a woman took an unexpected turn of things and allowed her to wear new colours. Benegal's movies tried to represent women's new realities and struggles. His women characters were confident and were able to voice their concerns.

Kalpana Lajmi's '*Rudali*' in 1993 was another brave step towards discourses on gender equality. Dimple Kapadia enacted the role of Rudali (female weeper) and brought out the dark truths controlling the life of women in feudalistic society of India. The film went out to the audience to declare resistance against casteism and gender discrimination. It was indeed an eye opening experience for the audience and the nation at large. The film offered many topics to write and speak on women's issues then.

The three films - *Manthan*, *Bhumika* and *Rudali* clearly express how for ages, in India, power operates as social structure, made up of numerous practices that maintain a cultural system of dominance. Anju Beniwal while presenting her thoughts in Indian Journal of Political Science says that a woman's power is conditioned by the responses and reactions of men. Because of the preconceived notions of the society, women are expected to behave in a way that is absolute in nature and meaningless in their life.<sup>7</sup>

At a time when the main Bollywood cinema was surging ahead with commercial cinema minting money betraying the value of cinema, Shyam Benegal and his ilk showed some profound understanding of Indian ethos and made sincere efforts to find proper voice for women in India. It is heartening to read how some critics like Anuj Kumar express their perception of these endeavours:

“In the 1970s when the mainstream Bollywood was running on testosterone, Shyam Benegal was busy making a sense of estrogens. “Ankur”, “Nishant” and “Manthan”, all reflected on the state of woman in a patriarchal society but in “Bhumika” she was central to the theme. At a time when the Hindi film heroine is reclaiming her space in the mainstream cinema, let's

hark back to time when her role was put under scanner by Benegal without crying his feminist concerns from the roof tops. In a society where relationships are measured from the point of view of man, when a woman decides to mould the norm, she ends up being lonely.”<sup>8</sup> However, with the passage of time, Indian cinema at large has never been able to redeem itself from malicious male gaze. Women in Indian cinema have endured all agonies emerging from this diseased social fact: objectification of women. The male audience have loved women being shown in glamorous light of eroticism. Unfortunately, many filmmakers continued making mockery of this stark truth and soaked in the glory of making movies which encouraged the lecherous eyes of the male audience. In 1990s and later, bawdy songs and scenes captured the imagination of the cinegoers and this resulted in the structure of women being in the center of ‘item numbers’. ‘*Munni Badnaam*’, ‘*Sheila Jawaan*’, ‘*Jalebi Bai*’ and all the other absurd names are purposefully depicted to allude deeper meanings than meets the eye. The ‘*Dhak-Dhak*’ and the ‘*UP-Bihar lootne*’ are equally terrible. Randomly, women weren’t offered any better roles for movies. The only chances they had was they being objectified as an item for male gaze. The male domination reigned supreme and things looked dismal. The question however arises as to why they were too keen to be exposed to be objectified? These are the greater concerns for bigger debates than mere philosophy.

Rira Brara, an Indian sociologist, professor and author, discusses in her work and says that the cinema in India has thus become ‘cinesexuals’ with unending ‘item numbers’ ruling the roost and filmmakers enjoying their ways to the banks. Without these item numbers films are seen as incomplete and worthless. This is what has become of women in Indian Cinema now. The questions now turn to how the new normative finds variable expressions inside and outside of reel life. Cinesexuality may enable the normal audience to wander from the core issues of life.<sup>9</sup>

Cinema in India has come of age and now things have changed far beyond imagination. Despite the shift in narratives around women, the truth remains that women are still struggling to find their true and definitive voices. Cinema in India has always been voicing women’s concerns since independence days. It is a great medium indeed as a vehicle for far-reaching changes in society. However, things have not been as good as they should have been given the number of movies on women’s issues. Gutsy cinema makers have been at regular intervals presenting dauntingly enough matters for public discussions and debates. Ever

since, parallel cinema was introduced in India, women related themes have drawn our attention. Films like *Rudali*, *Manthan*, *Mirch Masala*, and *Bazaar* did stir up some debates around women's life. But, they were not sufficient enough to cause a revolution. Considering the spate of crimes against women in India, one can only wonder why cinema is yet to see those social changes which definitely should have been there to score sweeping changes in the parochial hegemony in India.

To conclude, let us quote the words of Shyam Benegal, the harbinger of women-centric cinema in India: "As a filmmaker, I am a critic of the present. I've always had a sense of the world that I lived in. We've lived through the worst kind of inequalities and continue to do so. My subjects have emerged from that consciousness...the idea is to arouse empathy in a class that may otherwise not care about people who don't belong in and occupy the same spaces as they do." <sup>10</sup>

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