

## GENDER EQUALITY: AN ILLUSION IN INDIAN CINEMA A STUDY ON WOMEN IN INDIAN FILM INDUSTRY

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**Abstract:** Occasionally, it is observed, a female being the protagonist of a cinema than merely being objects of sexual desire. A study of the reviews of Bechdel test reveals that most of the Indian cinema does not qualify the test. The gender imbalance is evident not only on-screen but behind it also.

This paper mainly focuses on the theme 'visibility of women in Indian cinema'. Visibility, here, implies to women's presence behind the screen and the way they are depicted on the screen. The paper holds that involvement of women in the field of cinema, in India, is negligible. It is observed that misogyny is perpetuated in Indian cinema and women on-screen are frequently objectified. The current study, thus, chiefly stresses on the fact that the film industry in India is not gender (this paper focuses only on the concerns regarding women) friendly.

The paper further analyses the status of women in Indian cinema using ethics of realism. Through secondary sources of data, especially through documents and theories proposed by eminent film theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Siegfried Kracauer mainstream Hindi cinema is analysed. Concepts of 'role of agency', 'male gaze' and 'realism' in cinema are explained.

The current study contributes to the fields of Feminist Anthropology, Culture Studies and Cinema Studies.

**Keywords:** Women, Indian Cinema, Visibility, Equality, Bechdel Test, Realism, Misogyny.

**Introduction:** Research (Jackson and Jacjie, 1998) on women and cinema has engaged itself vividly with deliberations on women's identity in cinema. The study on women's identity in cinema became a major concern of 'second wave' feminism of 1960's and 70's, criticizing women's role in film industry.

The Indian film industry, to an extent is conservative in engaging with themes for cinematic purposes. It is regressive in the ideals it upholds and the values it projects. Specifically so, in case of women's role and identity in cinema (Butalia, 1984). Over ninety-five percent of Hindi Cinema revolves around men. The storyline of such cinema are men oriented, the central character being a man. The other five percent with women protagonists are often seen through 'male gaze' (explained below). (Kamath, 2014).

The paper focuses on the visibility of women in Indian Cinema. Visibility, here, pertains to 1) the presence of women in Indian cinema and 2) their presentation in the same. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section centres upon the exposure of women to film industry. This section specially focuses on the gender gap behind the screen; especially with regard to movie making. Here, the gender imbalance associated with activities in which women are involved, other than in acting; such as in direction, camera handling and editing are discussed. The second section deals with the portrayal of women on the screen, in cinema. The third section attends to ethics of realism with regard to the depiction of women in Indian cinema. Concerns regarding patriarchy and male bias in the industry are largely deliberated in the present paper. The topic of study in this paper is the mainstream

Hindi Cinema (Bollywood). A mention regarding the recent developments in the South Indian film industry is made conjointly. The terms cinema and film are used interchangeably in the paper.

**Exposure of Women to the Field of Cinema:** The prime focus of this section is to project the gender imbalance in the field of cinema. The film industry in India is male dominated and is seldom considered as a workspace for women.

A report by Geena Davis Institute (2014), released at 'Global Symposium on Gender in Media' says that the ratio of gender in Indian Film Industry stands at 6.2 males to every female, and only one-in-ten directors is a woman. Statistics reported by www.statista.com(2017) on 'Share of female filmmakers in selected countries worldwide between January 2010 and May 2013, by function', says that the percentage of women directors in Indian Film industry is 9.1%. The percentage of the women writers and producers are 12.1% and 15.2% respectively. These figures suggest the gender disparity in the field evidently vis-à-vis the total number of cinemas being produced by the industry, which ranges between 1,500 to 2,000. (Thomas, 2016) Film-making for the women in India is one of the most strenuous decisions taken as a career choice. The reason for this is the established patriarchy in the industry. It is further complicated by the restrictions imposed by the family. The problem is not only confined to workplace sexism but begins right from the instance as and when a female student aspires to pursue a career in films. The society hardly considers as girls worthy of a movie-making career (Prateek, 2016).

The underrepresentation of women in film industry can be noticed by analysing the number of women filmmakers in the industry. In Bollywood the number of women involved in cinematography, art direction and editing are negligible (Dasgupta, 2011). Film editor and former student of Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Arghyakamal Mitra (2011) says that the primary reason for the absence of women as film technicians in India is the mind-set of people.

*"Globally, film editors are mostly women. But in India, that's not the case. When I was at the Film and Television Institute of India, there would be six girls in a batch of 40 students. The insecurity of the field coupled with the perception that the industry is still not a good place to work.... Moreover, parents are still a little unsure about wanting their daughters to run around with a camera in toe..... If editing has a few names, sound and camera departments largely remain male-dominated."*

Cinematographer Ranu Ghosh (2011) adds, *"Men still can't accept that a woman will handle a camera. When I began my career, I was crudely turned down by men and there wasn't a single person who wanted to be my camera caretaker simply because I was a woman. Even light boys wouldn't want to take orders from a woman. It has taken me years to convince people that I am good at my job. It's a never-ending battle of skill as well as having to bust myths about women's abilities.....Family support is extremely important for women to continue working as technicians,"* (Dasgupta, 2011).

Deepa Mehta, while making the *Elements Trilogy – Fire (1996), Earth (1998) and Water (2005)*, which were based on the oppressive traditions of Indian culture, had to face numerous objections from religious organizations. She was not allowed to direct it within the country and she finally decided to shoot it in Sri Lanka. (Prateek, 2016).

The Indian Express (February 21, 2014) discloses that there is not a single full time female teacher at India's premier establishment, Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). The article says that there were only three female teaching faculty who were appointed on a full time basis in the institute from 1993 to 2013. The official website of FTII reveals that the twenty-four full time faculty members currently working at the institute, does not include a single woman. Considering the male-female ratio of the students, it can be observed that a censurable number of women started enrolling only from the last one decade (In last 20 years, only 3 full-time woman faculty members at FTII, 2014).

These evidences thus show that gender disparity prevails with regard to involvement of women in Film industry. This is manifested in gender oppression.

**Visibility of Women in Cinema – The Women on Screen:** This section throws light on the manner in which women are portrayed in cinema. Women, predominantly, in greater number of Indian cinema, are not characterized to be an equal to their male counterparts. Concerns with regard to objectification of women and such depiction in cinema are inspected in the present section.

To analyse the representation of women within power in a patriarchal society like India, it is essential to consider the role of agency in women's lives. 'Agency' according to Ritzer (2005) is the capacity of individual humans to act independently and to make their own free choices. Agency, thus, generally refers to micro level actors and to macro level collectives that act. In other words, any social being, whether an individual or a collective, can be considered to have agency. The feminist review of films is focused on the role of agency in the lives of women and on 'male gaze'.

The concept of Male Gaze was put forth by Laura Mulvey in her work 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema' (1975). Gaze can be explained as: "(a) Scopophilia or sexual pleasure in looking which is enhanced by the very way in which film is viewed-in a dark room with moving images controlled by a projector making it seem like a dream. (b) The gaze in dominant cinema is built upon notions of male-female differences created by a culture. The three 'looks' that derive from this 'gaze' are (i) Gaze within the film text-how men gaze at women (ii) The spectator's gaze that identifies with the male gaze and objectifies the women on the screen (iii) The camera's original 'gaze' that goes into the very act of filming." (Lakshmi, 1986, p. 113)

Discourse on images of women in cinema in light of the 'male gaze' can be done either sociologically or semiotically. The argument grounded in sociology is concerned with the role that women play, including the roles of wives, lovers and sisters in cinema. Semiology centres upon how women function as a sign. It deals with how the film communicates. Analysing a film in semiotic terms, one can understand how women are represented as what they represent for a man and by not what they actually are. (Lakshmi, 1986)

Using semiotic and psychoanalytical approaches, Anu Celly (2004), analysing representation of women in 'Indian popular cinema', indicates that the image of women in cinema is not the reality experienced by them in their daily life. Women's functions in cinema are mere influences of myth, custom and ritual. Victimization syndrome, as highlighted in cinema, is usually found as a component of women's image and life history. Gazes of the male protagonist regulate and limit women's subjectivity and sexuality to an object. For instance, the film "Devi", by Satyajit Ray,

which is perceived as a revolutionary and pioneering attempt to show women's image as a protagonist, adopts normative paradigm for the ideal construct of womanhood. Such a construct is based on customs and rituals. Furthermore, Supriya Agarwal has provided an analysis of the Muslim women's identity in films where she contended that, the portrayal of women were projected through stereotypes in Hindi cinema between 1970s to 1990s. Women's point of view was never included in their roles. This also applies for the projection of Muslim women as members of a minority community marginalized in society. They are placed with little choice in their own lives. Agarwal analysed four Muslim women focalized films such as Pakeezah, Nikaah, Bazaar and UmraoJaan. These films show that a secondary position is imposed on women by strong environmental forces of society. They are shown to be constrained by various societal pressures. Women are presented from the male point of view in that they cannot have an independent identity without being under the protection and control of men. In contrast to this, Men are portrayed as strong, powerful and authorized (Jain & Rai, 2002) . However, a paradox exists in the way women are treated in Indian cinema. It can be observed that immense amount of reverence is shown towards women in the role of mothers. In fact, "the reverence shown towards a mother is considered the most sacred and unquestionable of duties, mother's strength and power in the household is seen as absolute". Yet, it is noticed that the power of the mother seldom goes out of the household. She hardly has any say beyond the matters related to her home. (Butalia, 1984)

In Indian cinema much of the roles given to women are bad or good roles. The good ones often include mothers who are dutiful, daughters with the virtue of loyalty, sisters who are obedient, respectful and who support, comfort and hardly question their men. They are above all 'pure'. These ideals make up their 'strength'. These qualities are revered and preserved by them. On the other hand, modernity is equated with being bad. The modern woman is portrayed as being westernized, independent, aggressive, smoking and drinking. These qualities are equated with being 'loose', and are associated with male preserve. However, they cladding themselves in a sari project the change and reform in their ways. "There are, of course, exceptions to the above stereotypes, but they remain exceptions." (Butalia, 1984, p. 109).

The contemporary controversies in the South Indian film industry shows that the field is administered by inherent patriarchy. A sexist remark made by actor, Member of Parliament from Kerala and the President of Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA), that "if they (women) are bad, they may share the bed" (Surendran, 2017) shows the patriarchal ethos

existent in the industry. Srividya (2017) states that women have been the selling point of the Telugu cinema. Prema Malin, a film journalist says that "the focus (of films) has always been on women. Films have always been opinionated about how a woman is or should be. Earlier it used to be a projection of an oh-so-chaste woman as the heroine and now it's about a complicated young girl who can't be understood. Eitherway, women are objectified and generalized as per the ongoing trend".(Srividya, 2017, p. 20)The one-liners of several Telugu movies distinctly express the misogyny that is propagated through films. The one-liners of recent films like *Katamarayudu*, *Ninnu Kori*, *Rogue*, *Kittu Unnadu Jagratha*, *Rarandoi Veduka Chuddam* and *Shamantakamani* displays how misogyny is employed in Telugu cinema. The taglines stereotyping women have been very successful in appealing the theatre going audiences, who are mainly men. (Srividya, 2017)

**Women in Cinema - Through the Lens of Realism:** Having discussed about the way women are depicted in Indian cinema, it would be worth analyzing the women in Indian cinema with respect to the theory of realism. Realistic cinema believes that cinema portrays reality as it is. "In other words, the cinema of realism claims to tell the audience the truth and how can one question truth." (Lakshmi, 1986, p. 114).

Siegfried Kracauer, a film theorist wrote extensively about the conventions of realism in film. Kracauer, in his writings on realism and cinema holds that "films may claim aesthetic validity if they build from their basic properties like photographs, that is, they must record and reveal physical reality. A film is realistic because it correctly reproduces that part of the real world to which it refers".(Kracauer, 1997, p. 155). He perceived realism as an extremely important factor in cinema. Kracauer defined realism through categories, which separated the conventions of cinema into the 'basic' and the 'technical'. This implies, to discern and apply realism, a filmmaker must understand the physical reality and the photographic imagery that is being filmed. (Cusmar, 2013). Kracauer states that film is different from other art forms as it records life and captured reality. "Instead of projecting an abstract or imaginative world it descends to the material world." (Kracauer, 1974, p. 144). Thus for a film to be realist, according to Kracauer, it must record the world as it is.

Realism is thus, a school of thought, which propounds a theory, which enables to analyse films. Keeping in view the concept of realism, Satyajit Ray's film, *Ghare-Bhaire* is analysed. This film is thought to be as one early Indian film with woman as central character. In this film, a woman who was confined to the women's quarters in a traditional household, steps out to have an extra-marital affair. She then

feels burdened with guilt and feels justly punished when she becomes a widow or imagines herself as a widow. The film begins with a scene of her talking about herself after the affair. Nevertheless, when the film unfolds, she is not the narrator anymore. The camera then represents the director in terms of the 'knowledge' it is imparting. If the film had been from her point of view, the viewers would have known how the woman felt about her confinement; what was that moment when she stepped into the common quarters; how the world seemed to be to her, her feelings when she took the first step out of her confinement and the physical and emotional reaction to each of her actions. Not all these are made known to spectators. The viewers just see the character walking down the corridor. They do not know the feelings because the director is not concerned about these layers of emotions. The director states a fact of her stepping out; capturing it in realism that is lyrical. The viewers know how she looked, dressed, spoke and responded. In spite of all this, they do not know her. The surface details are perfect; perfect enough to cause emotional upheaval and identification, and yet they know her through physical events in her life, not through her private, non-expressed, repressed self. The hidden emotions never surface in cinema of this kind for it wants everything broken into physical, tangible facts that can be detailed. Films such as this claim to be are about real women. However, as Christine Gledhill asks, "are they really about women?" (Lakshmi, 1986, p. 114). Women in Indian cinema are often not presented as they naturally are.

**Conclusion and Future Directions:** In the last decade, there has been a positive change in the film industry regarding women's inclusiveness. *Queen*, a Vikas Bahl movie, is one among the rare Indian films that passed the Bechdel test. (Kamath, 2014). The Bechdel test asks for the following criteria. To pass the Bechdel test, the film must have (1) two female characters (preferably named), (2) who talk to each other (3) about something other than a man. *Highway*, *English Vinglish* and *Shadi ke side effects* are few other recent films that pay attention to the role of women.

However, women in Indian cinema are seldom portrayed as real human beings, true to themselves. One aspect that is never depicted is that of women as sexual beings. Their autonomy on their bodies and themselves is ignored. Whenever there is an emphasis given on her sexuality and her sexual desires, the underlying denotative meaning through such depictions would be of remorse to her in the end. Very few films look at a woman as a human being in her own right. There is generally hypocrisy in showing independence and modernity with badness (Butalia, 1984).

Women's issues are discussed in cinema but these are mostly confined to the social issues. The biological woman; the biological aspects of women are never discussed about. This is partly because of the silence spread by patriarchal norms about these issues in the industry and partly because of the stigma associated with these concerns among the consumers of cinema. A taboo exists in Indian society that female sexuality is to be covered up. When this taboo is broken, conservative minded audience, dismiss the film on the grounds of degradation of the female character.

As cinema has been one of the major channels that influence the society, it is crucial that film makers be more sensitive and responsible in depicting a particular gender. Government interventions to make film industry a women-friendly one and encouraging more women to work in the field can be justified, given the minimum attendance of women in film making. Steps such as bringing film industry under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, rectifying the imbalances in the pay and service conditions in the film industry, encouraging those films that uphold gender equality by instituting special awards and ensuring representation from women's organizations in film industry in discussions related to films would be some ventures that would pave way for an increased involvement of women in film industry and making the industry a women friendly one. Measures should be taken that films are screened through gender tests before they are released. This would keep films from being gender biased. Studies are ought to be conducted in relation to the concerns regarding biased depiction of women in cinema and minimal involvement of them in film industry. Detailed studies would help in addressing the problem of gender imbalance in film industry in an appropriate manner.

There is urgency that women should be accorded with the freedom to chose their career and that the film industry confirms a desirable atmosphere to satisfy the need for a women friendly workspace. Equality, if conveyed and attained in this field, would be one of the unequivocal courses to bring forth reversal in the attitude of the society towards women. Change will be gradual to appear in commercial Indian cinema. A real change would only occur when women begin to make films about themselves (Butalia, 1984). Organizations like Indian Women Cinematographers Collective (under construction), Western India Cinematographers Association (2017), Women in Cinema Collective (2017), and Women Making Films (2015) are expected to generate a change in the outlook of Indian cinema and make film industry a women friendly one.



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