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Breaking Stereotypes related to Married Women through the Lens of Gauri Shinde's 'English Vinglish' and Amit Sharma's 'Badhaai Ho'

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ABSTRACT: The research paper deals with the discussion of Film Theory. The paper explores the strides made by the female actors over the years. From its very humble beginnings now the female actors have reached a stage where they are able to perform their roles close to perfection. The journey of the female actors from the early times till present dissected threadbare by the authors. Two Indian Films Gauri Shinde's 'English Vinglish' and Amit Sharma's 'Badhaai Ho' have been identified and selected to explore the journey of female protagonist from the stage of naivety till complete maturity.

KEYWORDS: Film Theory, Feminist Film Theory, Feminine Tropes, Femme Fatale Liberation, Multidimensional characters

Film theory is a set of scholarly approaches within the academic discipline of film or cinema studies that began in the 1920s by questioning the formal attributes of motion pictures and that now provides conceptual frameworks for understanding the relationship of films with reality, the other arts, individual viewers, and society at large. Film theory is not to be confused with general film criticism, or film history, though these three disciplines interrelate.

Feminist Film Theory is a theory that discourses about women's participations and roles in every field in the community and in the society in general. A famous film critic named Laura Mulvey talks about the objectification of women in mainstream Hollywood cinema. The women characters are created in such a way that they cater to the needs of the male actor and the male audience. She draws inspiration from Jacques Lacan's Mirror Stage which explains the development of one's ego by the process of identification of one's image in the mirror. Different techniques are used to capture the close-ups of women's body parts which in turn caters to the male gaze. In the words of Mulvey, there are only two types of female characters namely virgins and whores instead of multidimensional characters. The reason given by Mulvey for objectification of women is that the society is male dominant, and it believes that women must be oppressed and objectified.

Even before the advent of the Male Gaze Theory by Mulvey, Marjorie Rosen mentions in her book about a device named 'Kinetoscope' which captured the moving images of women that were viewed by the male audience exclusively. In the beginning of the 20th century, women did not have much access to the outside world and relied upon women's magazines to understand their role in the society. During Victorian times, the economic condition was so appalling that they were forced to work for long hours in industries, and factories for a meagre income.

Rosen laid a solid foundation for feminist film theory. Her book 'Popcorn Venus' is divided into six parts.

Part one focuses on two types of characters namely, 'Eternal Child' and 'Vamp' tropes. Female Actors were expected to remain innocent even as they enter thirties. This character was portrayed by actors like Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish. Contrary to the first type, the second type is an embodiment of evil. In other words, Vamp represents the Dark woman. In short, only two binaries rose to prominence in Part One as per the views expressed by Rosen in Popcorn Venus. Part Two focuses on the trope of 'Femme Fatale.' A woman of this type used her sexuality to attract men with the intention of killing them.

In Part Three, Rosen introduces the concept of 'Mysterious woman' as the feminist movement was going down. Women characters performed the roles of detectives, spies etc. and the chief actor at that time was Greta Garbo. Another kind of woman portrayed in mainstream Hollywood cinema was 'Blonde Bombshell' who used her charm to trap men and use him as a gold digger. The actors who performed the role to perfection were May West and Jean Harlow, and others. The prevailing social conditions of that era paved the way for actors taking centre stage. In part

Three, there is a shift in the focus on a new kind of trope i.e., a rich woman getting a lot of leisure and as a result committing adultery.

In part four, one finds the portrayal 'Sexualized Pinup Woman' in mainstream movies. This kind of woman was psychologically shattered yet charming enough to capture the attention of audience. This sexualized pinup woman was aptly enacted by actors like Rita Hayworth and Jean Russell. Part Five talks of the 'Woman Alone trope which was depicted on the silver screen by eminent actors like Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, and others. Miniscule positive changes came in the way of actors with the passage of time. Women during the 60s and 70s lacking conventional beauty were also accepted as desirable leading to sexual revolution.

Next in line among womanfeminist film critics is Molly Haskell. She throws light on the challenges faced by filmmakers as one must exclude other genres including gangster film, adventure film, warm films so on and so forth. She talks about three types of women namely, 'Extraordinary,' 'Ordinary' and 'the transformation from Ordinary to Extraordinary woman.' Extraordinary women were strong and powerful women who were geared up to face challenges. The Ordinary woman remained passive throughout her life. The third category delve deep into the process of transformation which women undergo as they move ahead in lives.

Parallely, Indian mainstream movies too were gradually evolving when it comes to depictions of women characters in celluloid.

The first Indian Movie that got made was Raja Harishchandra in 1913. Till 1950s, only black and white movies were made in Bollywood. The period between 1950s and 1970s is regarded as the Golden Era of Bollywood cinema. In the early decades, women actors were portrayed as embodiments of virtues. Renowned actors like Madhubala, Mumtaz, Nutan and others made a stellar contribution as typical mainstream Bollywood heroines. The heroines of 70s danced to soft numbers that were shot in foreign locations. Prominent names include Asha Parekh, Helen, and others. It was only from 1980s, we find women playing roles at par with heroes. For instance, we find Sridevi in the film 'Himmatwala' outperforming and outdancing the hero. In fact, we find the heroine tackling the goons all by herself. From the 1990s, the distinction between the virtuous and the vamp like characters played by women was getting blurred. Even women actors like Karishma Kapoor, and others gave a lot of importance to glamour roles. One finds Raveena Tandon in the Movie 'Mohra' released in the year 1994 clinging on to the hero throughout the movie for support. Even in blockbusters like, 'Dil Toh Pagal Hai,' 'Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham,' 'Hum Aapke Hain Kaun' and others, we do not find career women. The sole aim of the heroine is marriage and only in case of failure, she turns towards her career.

In short, the evolution of Indian heroine took a long time than expected. The evolution was slow but steady. In the new millennium we have young filmmakers like Rakesh Mehra, Raju Hirani, and others who came out with fresh perspectives that change the face of the Indian heroine.

Let us now analyse the film 'Badhaai Ho' directed by Amit Sharma.

Badhaai Ho is a story of a middle-aged couple finding out that they are pregnant at an unconventional time in their life. They are already parents to a 25-year-old son and a teenage son. The film is a commentary on the society's warped notion on sexuality and desires. Major part of the film is about how the couple become the target for jeers and how the family battles shame. Particularly, the issue becomes exasperating for the two sons who must deal with the fact that everyone knows that their parents have an active sex life.

An interesting observation is the stark difference in the treatment meted out to the wife vs. the husband. The woman is constantly reminded of how she has overstepped the boundaries and been reckless by the female relatives whereas the man is hailed by fellow males for still "having game." The wife (Priyamvada), despite being reprimanded, looked down upon, is an empowered woman who stands her ground and takes the final call of not going for an abortion. She is also bold and expressive who urges the husband (Jeetender) to man up and break the news of her pregnancy to her mother-in-law.

The movie is a break from the routine and cliched stories of romance. In its most humorous and sweet form, it succeeds in sending its message across that parents too are individuals. More importantly, it sheds the holier than thou image of the mother, exposing the nurturing, caring, sacrificial mother who is also a wife with sexual desires, and needs.

Not to forget, Surekha Sikri, too has broken the mould of the stereotyped image of mothers-in-law who nag their daughters-in-law. Despite being bitter to Priyamvada inside their home, she does not shy away from taking a stand



for her daughter-in-law when she needs it the most, in front of relatives. Surekha's power packed dialogues are food for thought in which she brings up an important issue: of how childbearing is controlled by the society, a timeline for romance decided upon, by the society which ticks away like a time-bomb, the skewed notions of shame, and the actual meaning of shouldering responsibility and showering love and care.

Let us now begin to understand the portrayal of the female character in 'English Vinglish' Gauri Shinde directed the movie.

English Vinglish is not just a movie. It is a revelation. Sridevi's phenomenal acting has elevated the status of the film. The film highlights the journey of Shashi Godbole (Sridevi), a middle-aged homemaker who lives in India. Despite being a devoted wife and mother, she is constantly put down by her family because of her inability to speak in English. The movie brings out an essential element of Colonialism.

Shashi's life completely turns around when she goes to New York city for the first time to attend her niece's wedding. There she struggles to navigate her way and decides to join a course in English Speaking. Some notable scenes prior to her journey are, when she visits her teenage daughter's school for the parent teacher meeting. Her daughter is thoroughly embarrassed at Shashi's inability to communicate in English and directly tells her not to come to her school anymore as she feels humiliated by the incident. Shashi's husband too does not support her dreams and wishes. The exchange of dialogues between Shashi and her husband clearly brings into focus, the lamentable state of a typical married Indian homemaker who is continuously mocked at. He asks her to stop her small-scale business of making and delivering home-made laddoos as what he earns is sufficient to provide a comfortable life. Shashi then retorts that it is her passion, and she feels good about the autonomy that comes with it. But her replies are always met with mockery.

Despite, many hurdles, and challenges Shashi remains resolute in her determination to learn English. All by herself in an alien city, she falls, fails, cries, laughs, and explores life as it comes to her. Once she joins the English-Speaking class, she comes to realize that there are people like her, who cannot speak in English and wish to learn the language because of several reasons. New York City allows Shashi, a reticent, shy, and a devoted woman to explore her identity away from her husband and her children. Transformation from a reticent homemaker to a confident woman at the end of the movie clearly leaves the audience spellbound. The role played by Sridevi appealed to everyone irrespective of color, caste, and creed. The film also questions the notion prevailing in Indian society related to English. Further, the film also depicts how success changes the perception of people all around.

CONCLUSION

Literature is the mirror of society. Movies reflect life. The authors have made an earnest attempt to study two movies with the objective of finding out the factors that led to breaking the stereotypes especially related to married women. This paper has also traced the evolution of Indian heroines over the years. The inputs given by Feminist film theorists also throw light on the idea prevailing in Western society and the situation is the same in both the East and the West. The coming years will certainly pave the way for further transformation especially related to women characters in both Hollywood and Indian Cinema.

The courage exhibited by Heroines in both the films, 'Badhaai Ho' and 'English Vinglish' is a lesson for Indian audience. The heroines in both the movies juxtapose the qualities of both introvert and extrovert. In other words, they fulfil the responsibilities expected by the Indian society and at the same time cannot take any harsh criticism lying down. It is this characteristic trait that enables them to chase their dreams. Patience, industry, resilience etc. are some of the traits that help the female protagonists in these movies to reach great heights.

A small-town woman played by Sridevi firmly stands her ground for pursuing her dreams despite being snubbed repeatedly by her kith and kin.

For a change, in both the movies the heroines outshine and outperform the heroes. In fact, the heroines carry the film on their shoulders throughout, in short, one can safely say that both these movies represent coming of age Indian cinema.

The complete transformation of married women from the post-Independence Era from shy and passive homemakers to successful career women have been captured through the lens of two eminent filmmakers, Gauri Shinde, and Amit Sharma.



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