

Representation of Feminism in Indian Cinema

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Abstract:

This paper aims to examine the representation of feminism in Indian cinema. Indian cinema has played a significant role in shaping societal norms and influencing public opinion. Over the years, there has been a gradual shift in the portrayal of women characters, reflecting changing ideologies and aspirations. This paper explores the evolution of feminist representation in Indian cinema, from the early years to the present day. It analyzes key films, their narratives, and the impact they have had on society. It also discusses the challenges faced by feminism in Indian cinema and suggests ways to promote more inclusive and empowering narratives for women.

Keywords: Feminism, Indian cinema, Inclusivity, Empowering narratives.

Content: In the early years of Indian cinema, women characters were primarily portrayed as submissive and docile, conforming to traditional gender roles. These films reinforced patriarchal norms, emphasizing the importance of a woman's chastity, virtue, and self-sacrifice. Examples include films like *Mother India* (1957) and *Pakeezah* (1972), where women were often portrayed as victims in need of male protection. Such representations contributed to the perpetuation of gender inequality in Indian society.

The emergence of new wave cinema in the 1970s brought a significant shift in the portrayal of women characters. Filmmakers like Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani introduced narratives that challenged traditional gender roles. Films like *Ankur* (1974) and *Arth* (1982) addressed issues of female empowerment, marital discord, and societal expectations. These films showcased women characters with agency, exploring their desires, struggles, and aspirations. Although a step forward, these films remained relatively niche and had limited mainstream impact.

The rise of women-centric films in 1990s marked a significant turning point with the rise of women-centric films in Bollywood. Actresses like Sridevi, Madhuri Dixit, and Rekha

portrayed strong, independent women characters who challenged societal norms. Films like Chandni (1989), Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995), and Lajja (2001) featured female protagonists who confronted patriarchal oppression, fought for their rights, and made choices beyond societal expectations. These films reflected a growing consciousness around feminism and resonated with audiences across the country.

The new millennium witnessed a proliferation of films that explored feminism in more nuanced ways. Movies like Queen (2013), Piku (2015), and Pink (2016) depicted women breaking free from societal shackles, asserting their individuality, and challenging gender stereotypes. These films not only resonated with urban audiences but also sparked conversations around women's rights and empowerment. Additionally, films like Padman (2018) and Mission Mangal (2019) tackled important issues such as menstrual hygiene and women in science, raising awareness and promoting dialogue.

While the representation of feminism in Indian cinema has made significant strides, challenges and criticisms persist. One recurring criticism is the portrayal of women characters as overly sexualized objects of desire. There have been several Bollywood movies that can be considered as epitomes of feminism, as they have portrayed strong female characters, challenged gender stereotypes, and advocated for women's rights and empowerment. Here are a few notable examples:

Queen (2013): Queen is a coming-of-age film that follows the journey of Rani, played by Kangana Ranaut. After being left at the altar, Rani embarks on a solo honeymoon trip to Paris and Amsterdam, where she discovers her independence, builds self-confidence, and embraces her identity as an individual. The film challenges societal expectations and celebrates a woman's ability to navigate life on her own terms.

English Vinglish (2012): English Vinglish tells the story of Shashi, played by Sridevi, a housewife who faces ridicule for her lack of proficiency in English. Determined to prove her worth, she enrolls in an English language course and discovers her self-worth and capabilities. The film highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing a woman's talents, irrespective of societal judgments.

Mirch Masala (1987): Directed by Ketan Mehta, Mirch Masala is set in colonial India and tells the story of a fearless woman, Sonbai, who stands up against the oppressive local tax collector and his men. The film highlights the theme of women's resistance and empowerment in the face of patriarchal oppression. Sonbai's refusal to succumb to the advances of a powerful man and her defiance become symbolic of feminist resistance.

Chandni Bar (2001): Directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, Chandni Bar follows the life of a woman named Mumtaz, played by Tabu, who faces numerous challenges while working in

a dance bar in Mumbai's red-light district. The film explores the struggles faced by women in the patriarchal society, highlighting issues like poverty, exploitation, and limited opportunities. While the film sheds light on the harsh realities faced by women, it doesn't explicitly focus on feminist ideology.

Thappad (2020): Directed by Anubhav Sinha, Thappad revolves around the story of a woman named Amrita, played by Taapsee Pannu, who decides to seek a divorce after her husband slaps her at a party. The film addresses the issue of domestic violence and challenges societal norms that often trivialize or overlook such incidents. Thappad emphasizes the importance of consent, respect, and individual agency, highlighting feminist themes of empowerment and self-worth.

Kahaani (2012): Directed by Sujoy Ghosh, Kahaani follows the journey of Vidya Bagchi, played by Vidya Balan, as she searches for her missing husband in the city of Kolkata. While the film primarily revolves around the mystery and suspense genre, it also touches upon themes of female resilience, determination, and the complexities of motherhood. Vidya Bagchi's character showcases strength and resourcefulness, embodying qualities often associated with feminist ideals.

Naam Shabana (2017): Directed by Shivam Nair, Naam Shabana is a prequel to the film Baby and focuses on the character of Shabana Khan, played by Taapsee Pannu, who is recruited by a secret intelligence agency. The film portrays Shabana as a strong, independent woman who overcomes personal and professional challenges. While the film highlights gender equality within the realm of espionage and action, it does not delve deeply into broader feminist themes.

Piku (2015): Piku revolves around the life of a strong-willed woman named Piku, played by Deepika Padukone. She balances her personal and professional life while caring for her aging father. The film subverts traditional gender roles and showcases the complexities of a daughter's relationship with her father, emphasizing the importance of a woman's autonomy and choices.

Pink (2016): Pink addresses important issues of consent, victim-blaming, and societal judgment. The film centers around the story of three women who are falsely accused of solicitation and assault. It emphasizes the importance of consent, challenges patriarchal attitudes, and highlights the significance of women's agency and voice.

Neerja (2016): Neerja is a biographical film based on the true story of Neerja Bhanot, a flight attendant who sacrificed her life while protecting passengers during a hijacking. The film celebrates Neerja's bravery, resilience, and selflessness, portraying her as an embodiment of courage and empowerment.

Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016): Lipstick Under My Burkha is a bold and unapologetic film that follows the lives of four women living in a conservative society in India. The movie delves into their desires, dreams, and struggles, highlighting their agency, sexuality, and the suppression they face. It challenges societal norms and sheds light on women's aspirations and rights.

Feminism in Indian films has become an increasingly important topic and has played a significant role in shaping the portrayal of women in cinema. Here are some key points regarding feminism in Indian films:

Exploration of Women's Issues: Indian films have started addressing women's issues more openly and critically. Filmmakers have tackled subjects such as gender inequality, women's empowerment, reproductive rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and more. These films aim to raise awareness, challenge societal norms, and initiate conversations about women's rights and equality.

Strong Female Characters: There has been a notable increase in the portrayal of strong, independent, and empowered female characters in Indian films. These characters are often depicted as individuals who can make their own choices, pursue their dreams, challenge traditional roles, and fight against injustice. They serve as role models for audiences and inspire discussions on feminism.

Breaking Stereotypes: Indian cinema has played a crucial role in breaking gender stereotypes and challenging traditional notions of femininity. Female characters are no longer limited to being passive or submissive. They are portrayed as assertive, confident, and capable of taking charge of their lives. This helps in challenging societal expectations and empowering women.

Female-Centric Films: There has been a rise in female-centric films in Indian cinema, where women are not just peripheral characters but are at the center of the narrative. These films explore women's stories, experiences, and perspectives in-depth, giving them agency and complexity. They celebrate the strength and resilience of women and provide a platform for feminist storytelling.

Filmmaker Perspectives: Female filmmakers in India have been at the forefront of championing feminist narratives. Their unique perspectives and experiences have shaped the way women are represented in Indian cinema. Female directors, writers, and producers are increasingly taking charge of projects, resulting in more authentic and nuanced portrayals of women on screen.

Challenging Patriarchy: Indian films have started questioning and challenging patriarchal norms and structures. They highlight the oppression and discrimination faced by women and critique the societal expectations that restrict their freedom and choices. By challenging patriarchy, these films contribute to the feminist discourse and promote gender equality.

Intersectionality: Intersectional feminism has also found its way into Indian films. Filmmakers are exploring the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds, including different castes, classes, religions, and sexual orientations. This intersectional approach recognizes the complexities of women's lives and emphasizes the importance of addressing multiple forms of discrimination.

While feminist perspectives in Indian films have made significant strides, it is important to note that there is still progress to be made. Challenges such as the persistence of gender stereotypes, limited opportunities for women behind the camera, and the need for more inclusive and diverse narratives remain. However, the increasing visibility of feminism in Indian cinema indicates a growing awareness and commitment to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Some movies have been criticized for objectifying female characters by emphasizing their physical appearance, focusing on their bodies, and presenting them primarily as objects of desire or fantasy for the male gaze. This can contribute to reinforcing harmful stereotypes, promoting unrealistic beauty standards, and reducing women to passive, one-dimensional characters. The objectification of women in movies can have negative effects on society. It perpetuates the notion that a woman's value lies solely in her physical attractiveness, leading to the marginalization of women's experiences, achievements, and contributions. It can also contribute to the normalization of gender inequality and the perpetuation of harmful power dynamics.

However, it is important to note that not all movies or portrayals of female characters involve objectification. Many films feature complex and empowered female characters who are multidimensional, with their own agency, goals, and narratives. These films challenge traditional gender roles, promote female empowerment, and provide more diverse and realistic representations of women.

Addressing the objectification of women in movies requires a collective effort from filmmakers, audiences, and the industry as a whole. Filmmakers can strive to create narratives that go beyond superficial portrayals and provide more depth and complexity to female characters. Audiences can engage critically with the media they consume, support films that depict women in empowering and diverse roles, and raise awareness about the impact of objectification. The industry itself can prioritize inclusivity and diversity, promote equal

opportunities for women in filmmaking, and encourage more authentic and respectful representations of women on screen.

In conclusion, we can say that by challenging and moving away from objectification, films can play a crucial role in promoting gender equality, fostering a more inclusive and respectful society, and providing audiences with diverse and empowering representations of women. It is important to note that the impact of women-centric films on society is not instantaneous, but rather an ongoing process. The cumulative effect of diverse and inclusive storytelling can gradually reshape societal attitudes, values, and behaviors, contributing to a more equitable and just society.

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