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Portrayal of Women in Select Films showcasing Gender Empowerment: An Insightful Investigation

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Abstract

The fundamental dispositions and characteristics of human nature are essentially immutable. The same passions, emotions, and even situations are seen again and again in traditional film history. Women, in films, were generally showcased as stereotypical damsels in distress, but in recent times, there is a complete transition in their roles. They are now becoming more complex modern figures like female superheroes and multifaceted agency-driven protagonists. This article endeavours to investigate how women in films transition from stereotypical manifestations to more intricate and empowered characters, ruminating societal shifts and challenging traditional social roles. Films like "Mother India", "Paromitar Ekdin", and "Dahan" have changed the perception of societal attitudes towards gender roles. Sometimes, these types of films challenge and reinforce the patriarchal power structures and gender hierarchies in narratives and techniques. This research shows that there is a growing tendency of female actors and spectators in films, who have especially an active propensity for female-led narratives, which are vital for fostering better and more diverse on-screen representations.

Keywords: patriarchal, stereotype, gender, empowerment, narrative

In the twenty-first century creative literature, the theme of gender studies occupies a very special place on account of the increased philosophical and critical awareness of the individual and his multifariousness. Propriety is something safely comatose within each of us as "our unique whatness". The academic field of gender studies is said to have come out from the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, a period remarkably known as the second wave of feminism. An attitude to gender studies involves multidisciplinary areas of research and academic investigation, which generally pinpoints the social, cultural and political construction of gender. It also examines how gender intersects with other identity markers such as race, class, sexuality, and ability to shape individual experiences, social relationships, and power dynamics.

The interdisciplinary area of women and gender studies generally focuses on the societal roles, sagacity, rights, empowerment and intersecting identities. There was a time when women had to depend on men for maintenance. Marriage was the only means of getting their livelihood honestly. The alternative was prostitution, which has unfortunately been called "the oldest profession of women". We cannot even blame G.B. Shaw for observing that marriage is only 'legalized prostitution'. From the last century, a remarkable change has been noticed in every field of studies, where women have been empowered into new roles. Women, belonging to the peasant families work in the fields and help in household work. We find some women in dominating positions in several countries. Nobody can challenge their abilities. Women like Madam Curie, Bachendri Pal, Kalpana Chawla, Bula Choudhury, Sunita Williams, to mention only a few, have left their indelible marks in the midst of masculine domination. In film industry throughout the world, women compete with male actors in their competency and ability to perform. There are several films, made around the globe, which highlight personal growth and independence of women.

In India, before and after independence, women have been valued as the very foundation of 'shakti' (power), creation and leadership. Through their talents and diligence, women of India are displaying remarkable competency in every field – from sports to science and research, and from agricultural activities to space investigation. In Indian cinema, increased representation of women writers, directors, and streaming service has provided eminent scope to non-traditional female characters and niche narratives that mainstream theatrical markets earlier sidelined. It is usual that in most of Indian films, the female counterpart generally entertains the public by some activities like dancing, singing, and also acting in some romantic scenes. But certain categories of movies have female heroes. They steer the movies on their shoulders without any dominant male counterparts, leaving behind a long-lasting message for society. They attack those apparently spotless surfaces of social evil and patriarchic looked perception. Some Indian films regarding women empowerment include 'Mary Kom', 'Dangal', 'Thappad', 'Pink', 'Neerja', and 'Mrs.', which explore the roles of women challenging social norms and achieving personal as well as professional goals. 'Mary Kom', 'Dangal', and 'Neerja' reflect female resilience and courage whereas 'Thappad', 'Pink' and 'Mrs.' focus on personal growth and freedom. 'Mary Kom' is the real story of a woman, who despite struggles and challenges went on to become a world champion. In 'Dangal', we find a father, who has been engaged to train his own daughters to make them international wrestlers, overcoming the gender impediments. 'Neerja' is a sort of a biopic, where a flight attendant courageously immolated her own life in order to save the passengers during a plane hijack. In 'Thappad', a woman determines to stand up for herself after her husband abuses her by slapping, thus challenging patriarchal provisions. The movie 'Pink' tackles the issues of compliance and sexual coercion, emphasizing the right of women to say 'no'. 'Mrs.' is an adaptation of "The Great Indian Kitchen"; it depictures a woman's journey to reclaim her identity and delegacy after matrimony.

As the objective of the present article is to focus on women empowerment in films like "Mother India", "Paromitar Ekdin" and "Dahan", it is noteworthy to explore how the women break the shackles of circumstances and external pressures, becoming prominent figures. In these three films, we notice resilient women, who face societal straits and

individual losses albeit their significant differences in stories and principal relationships. However, all three films spin round the topics of flexibility and empowerment.

Radha: An Archetypal Woman in "Mother India":

In the Hindi film, "Mother India" by Mehboob Khan, Radha is the pivotal character and the protagonist– a strong and self-dedicated matriarch, who incarnates resiliency, motherhood, and moral probity from the lens of penury, miseries, and individual damages. She represents an archetypal Indian woman, whose progression focuses on both, her personal experiment as a mother and the struggles of a newly-independent India. She is a symbol of strength and ethical leadership in rural India. Her portrayal is empowering in one sense, and restrictive in another: she is admired as a capable woman, yet valued mainly for how fully she serves family and nation. She values morality and social justice above blood relations and personal material love. Shamu, Radha's husband, is compelled to quit the village after losing his two arms during agricultural activities. Her mother-in-law, who always supported her in miseries, dies suddenly. After that, the sole responsibility naturally falls on Radha and she is to carry the burden of the family. She is to fight a cruel moneylender, all the while maintaining her dignity and principles. Despite countless hardships – including floods, famines, and losses – Radha shows an unwavering commitment by reconstructing her home, working in the agricultural fields, and all the time endeavoring to resist herself and her family from the exploitation of the moneylender, Sukhilala. The film shows her as the ultimate protector of the land and her family, challenging the 1950s stereotype of women as purely passive sufferers, in spite of the critiques that she fits the traditional 'ideal', nurturing mother archetype.

Khan's Radha is considered as a pillar of strength and a metaphor for the new Indian womanhood, having deep nationalist and feminist undertones. She is used as a national symbol. She does not care for herself and dedicates her own desires and maternal instincts for justice and the welfare of her family and her village. This reaches its climax when she does not hesitate to shoot her own lawless and rebellious son, Birju, who had become a bandit to uphold justice and communal ethics. Ramu, who is obedient and sensible, does not take the divergent paths, which her motherhood takes. In short, Radha is the moral and emotional core of Mehboob Khan's "Mother India" – a symbol of dedication, womanhood, and resilience, who rises above adversity to uphold what she believes, is right, even though at great personal cost.

The image of the self-sacrificing mother became central to the Bollywood narratives, especially after independence. The cinematic impact of Mehboob Khan's "Mother India" has a powerful influence on the spectators. Nargis's portrayal is deemed iconic, gaining the film global, critical and popular acclamation. The film's depiction of Radha motivated generations of audiences and has been extensively a popular subject of feminist film theory for its nuanced treatment of gender, motherhood and ethical leadership. Critics note that the movie turns her into a figure of Bharat Mata. So, her personal suffering becomes an allegory of India's hardship, endurance, and postcolonial self-making. More recent films have shifted towards strongly nuanced and empowered representations, portraying mothers as complex individuals with identities and ambitions beyond the family.

Loneliness within the Patriarchal Society in "Paromitar Ekdin":

Aparna Sen's Bengali film "Paromitar Ekdin" explores the theme of delegacy, solidarity, and self-discovery within the constraints of patriarchy. The film focuses on how women

navigate societal expectancy and find empowerment through their relationships with other women. It also reflects the unique and unsurpassed bond between Sanaka, the mother-in-law and Paromita, the daughter-in-law, despite generational, social and temperamental inequalities. Aparna Sen's Sanaka and Paromita navigate trauma and social expectation with agency, especially in scenes where they openly challenge patriarchal family dynamics.

Paromita is portrayed as a young educated bride, full of modern ideas, while Sanaka represents an older, more traditional worldview. Paromita experiences loneliness because society expects an unmarried woman to give up her individual desires' propriety. Though she is well-educated and free-thinking, she remains emotively ignored. Patriarchal society regards women predominantly through marriage and caretaking responsibilities. That is why Promita's identity remains marginalized. Sanaka also suffers deeply. In spite of being a wife and mother, she gets little appreciation and admiration from her husband. He husband's dominance and mastery build a silent emotional prison house. She cannot sincerely disclose her feelings because patriarchal cultural practices demand coercion and silence from women. Initially, their personalities differ but eventually they find solidarity and amity in each other, imparting intimate moments and reciprocal understanding, especially about sexual frustration and ethical limitations they face as women. Paromita selects self-governance over binding task and claims her right to reshape her life. She forsakes Biru, her husband and remarries, a determination that splits the social expectancy. Choosing a partner she thinks, will prove better for her than leaving a family that needs her. Sanaka embodies both weakness and quiet ethical dominance: through her kinship with Paromita the film narrative examines female amity, liability, duty and the dismal reciprocation between 'home rule' and 'onus' in patriarchal social system. Her death is framed as a "surrender to solitude". Paromita – her only source of normalcy and friendship – leaves, Sanaka loses her anchor to the world. Sen also explores the marginalization of their children in her beautiful film, i.e., Sanaka's daughter with schizophrenia and Paromita's child with cerebral palsy, focusing the family and society's fanaticism and the incoherence faced by these women. Here, motherhood is not only emotional, but also restrictive; women's identity is tied to family, leading to the loss of their individuality. Sen's narrative moves back and forth between past and present, utilizing retention to deepen the story of female empathy, solidarity and resilience against societal persecution. It is no exaggeration to say that the film "Paromitar Ekdin" is a poignant study of female subjectivity, friendship, loneliness, and the struggle for self-expression in a patriarchal Indian middle-class family setting. The film also powerfully critiques the restrictive norms around arranged marriage and familial roles, offering a deep insight in the emotional and social struggles, which women face when their relationships defy tradition. Besides, the film suggests that patriarchy does not control women socially but also isolate them psychologically. Women are denied freedom, recognition, and emotional fulfilment. Even inside a crowded family, they remain lonely.

Thus, "Paromitar Ekdin" is not just a family drama; it is a "body politics" of representation. It suggests that while younger generation (Paromita) may find agency and choose to walk toward a better life, the older generation (Sanaka) is often too deeply woven into the fabric of the home to survive its unraveling.

Gendered Behavior and Patriarchy in "Dahan":

The Bengali film "Dahan" by Rituparno Ghosh is an adaptation of a novel inspired by a real harassment incident, allowing for an examination of how such experiences are portrayed and understood within the social context of Kolkata. It examines the issues of authorship, narrative adaptation and the performance of gender in response to social pressures. The depiction of masculinities of the male characters, particularly hegemonic 'bhadralok masculinity', makes it easy to comprehend how gendered atrocities are enacted and perpetuated within a patriarchal society.

Ghosh's film "Dahan" centers on the social drama following the molestation of a newly-married woman, Romita, by a group of men on the streets of Kolkata, while returning home with her husband. No one would help them except a young school teacher named Jhinuk, who bravely rescues Romita and her husband, Palash. She becomes a heroine in the media, getting wide acclamation. She is open-minded and mostly disciplined woman who abdicates to turn away from mob violence. Her iron determination builds the film's central tension: her stand discloses both the offenders' networks and the vulnerability of social corroboration– she faces reproaches, intense moral and familial pressure, impertinent inquiries in the court, snubs, splitting her off from her community and social circle. Romita is not viewed as a model of excellence or bravery like Jhinuk; her importance lies in exhibiting how a 'common' woman is tested, destabilized, and gently thrust into a world of quiet resilience. Her wavering and perseverance chart the moral tension of the society around her, and her tentative moves toward self-assertion mark the narrative's fragile opening toward feminist agency. However, following the incident, both women face unbearable pressures, threats from the offenders and a sheer lack of support from the police. Later on, Romita's husband, Palash, in an amazing tragic turn, also assaults her, leading to further personal and social complications. Her husband and in-laws are more concerned with family reputation than her trauma. Instead of getting emotional support from them, she experiences suspicion and control. This reflects how patriarchal marriage often values social reputation above women's dignity. The case against the molesters fails due to corruption and male dominance. Trina is structurally a young woman who fortifies and involves in the main course of the narrative, i.e., in the ethical and pathological break-up of the incident. Her trajectory parallels and fouls up the central story of Romita and Jhinuk. She is neither a victim like Romita nor a rescuer like Jhinuk. She represents a third kind of woman who always gets entangled in the logic of male violence or settle the dispute, and mark a little but important boarder. Romita's sister-in-laws sides with her, strengthening her right to speak up and to seek justice. The film reveals the harsh realities of middle-class Indian society, focusing powerfully on themes of patriarchy, social stigma, moral dilemma, the courage and resilience of women. At the end, both Romita and Jhinuk are left to face their lives alone. However, they emerge quite stronger from their experiences, symbolically moving towards freedom despite the darkness of patriarchy around them. The film is also viewed as an exploration of the sexual politics of the time, diving deep into the complex relationships between gender, power, and violence.

Thus, "Dahan" presents patriarchy as a social system that controls women through gender expectations, victim-blaming, and family pressure. The film reveals how gender

behavior is socially constructed and how women suffer emotional and social oppression while resisting patriarchal norms.

Conclusion:

In Indian cinema, the delegation of women has expanded from occasional, didactic depiction to a wide variety of delicate, sometimes contrary portrayal that both highlight and shape social change. Mainstream portrayals often revert to spectacle or moralizing resolutions, which can undermine more realistic and systematic critique.

Thus, we see that "Mother India", "Paromitar Ekdin" and "Dahan" rotate around the themes of female resiliency and empowerment. "Mother India" emphasizes the strength of a matriarch's sacrifice; "Paromitar Ekdin" explores the healing power of female bonds and complexities of mental illnesses, while "Dahan" tackle's difficult themes like gender violence and caste discrimination. Taken together, these films trace a critical evaluation of women's representation in Indian cinema - from the mythic mother to the subdued wife - rebirthing as the "assertive urban woman" calling full justice to her dignity as well as multifarious demanding roles thrust on her.

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