

CHAPTER- II
WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA

In 1896, India was first exposed to motion pictures when the Lumiere Brothers' Cinematographe showed six soundless short films on July 7 in Bombay. By 1899, Harishchandra Bhatvadekar shot two short films, which were exhibited with Edison's projecting kinoscope. Throughout the first two decades, the trend continued with filmmakers such as Hiralal Sen and F. B. Thanawalla, J. F. Madan and Abdullah Esoofally, and others. Dada Sahib Phalke produced India's first indigenous silent film, Raja Harishchandra, in May of 1913, which enabled the film industry to truly arise. By 1920, the Indian Cinema was becoming part of society

In the 1920's an Indian film maker Himanshu Rai made Indo-German collaborative films. Starting with silent films and moving on to the talkies, Rai made a number of films based on Indian mythology, history and later on social issues. Like his predecessor Phalke who was more indigenous and worked within the Swadeshi project, Rai was also responding to the colonial experience by constructing self conscious Indian images and narratives, a sense of Indianness not only for the Indian audience but for the European market. The very nature of his collaborations (the early historicals - *Shiraz*, *Prapanch Pash*) unavoidably fell within the discourse of orientalism leading to a certain glamorisation of Indian history. Rai used a number of Eurasian actresses to play the female lead characters. These women were given Hindu names like Sita Devi - and were introduced to the public as "educated Hindu women". This anomaly of Eurasian actresses representing Indian historical/mythological characters sets up an interesting colonial momenta and underlines the problematics of its representation .I would pin this as an early moment of global forces in operation - where an European technical team, a set of Eurasian actresses, an Indian scriptwriter and director - set about filming Indian narratives. Devika Rani joined this unit as costume designer and upgraded as heroine and later as co-partner of Bombay Talkies - the production

company Rai set up in Bombay. In *Achyut Kanya* Devika Rani introduced the village belle look (a curious blend of western sophistication and Indian costumes). This representation has had a lasting impact on how Indian rural women should look on screen, a construct from which later realist directors had to struggle to break away from.

In later decades of the history of cinema one can identify much of such moments. The nationalist rhetoric of the pre-independence years produced films valorising the mother figure. Mehboob Khan's *Aurat*, a modest film made in the early forties was remade in colour as *Mother India* in 1956. The making of the new nation, the projection of Indian culture to the world market, the first International Film Festival in Delhi - perhaps all these factors led to the tremendous reception of the film both at home and abroad. It was the immediate post independence moment that led to the phenomenal iconisation and identification of the mother and nation in popular consciousness. Nationalist discourse constitutes the female body as a privileged signifier and various struggles are waged over the meaning and ownership of that body. What does it mean for women to be explicitly evoked in theories of nation only when their specificity can serve a particular cause? Viewing nation as narrative H.J. Bhabha puts emphasis on how the nation is articulated in language, signifiers, textuality, and rhetoric. It emphasises the difference between the nation state as a set of regulations, policies, institutions, organizations and national identity - that is nation as culture. Looking at nation as text, as culture, questions the totalization of national culture opens up the widely disseminated forms through which subjects construct the 'field of meanings associated with national life'. Bhabha talks about the spaces in between through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. As the women's movement gained strength in India and highlighted women's oppression and a struggle for an egalitarian Society - a series of women film makers brought women from the margins to the center of their texts.

An alternate view point and a female gaze brought a focus on female subjectivity. A number of films were made by Aparna Sen, Sai Paranjpye, Vijaya Mehta, Aruna Raje and Kalpana Lajmi - which were sensitive portrayals of women protagonists, in search of social and sexual identity, women firmly located in specific sociohistorical contexts. The advent of satellite television in the '80s suddenly changed the viewer's world view. Foreign images, MTV culture - became part of everyday viewing experience. Narrative cinema was rather quickly replaced by the dominant image.

In Indian mainstream cinema the audience continue to see a patriarchal version of female sexuality. Masculinity is defined as the muscular body and physical aggression. The visual spectacle and collage have taken over as mandatory song and dance sequences through c confusing international locales which disrupt the viewer's sense of time and space. Increasingly the pleasure element is gaining precedence over any concern with a narrative. *Dushman* directed by a woman producer and a woman director- perpetuates this rhetoric of violence. It is a disconcerting observation that a language of cinematic violence appropriates women film makers and disallows any alternate subjective vision to underpin the narrative. Every scene of male violence signals the consolidation of criminality and vigilantism with an increasing displacement of the state's law and order role. Criminalising rape identifies with a progressive legal position but at the same time induces the voyeuristic pleasure prompted in the cinematic representations of rape. These films force us to reconsider the limits and possibilities of equating rape and revenge scenes and the masochistic underpinning of the rape scenes in this genre. These revenge films retain the rule of targeting modern urban women as victims - fashion models, college teachers, newlywed wives, policewomen. The metaphor of the city and the criminal/ psychopath lurking in the streets doubly exposes the vulnerability and the threatened or real violation of these women.. Even while revenge

narratives provide female stars with more dominant roles, women's access to avenging power in these films is intimately predicated on rape. The avenging women genre can actually be said to be a giddy masculine concoction. The rape scene provides the narrative ruse for the revenge plan while providing the spectator with a range of scopophilic pleasures. Gopalan writes the interlocking narratives of rape and revenge do not sufficiently dislodge or displace conventional representation of Indian cinema. The present day generation view Hindi films more in terms of an identity issue and has appropriated Hindi film music and dance as a means of cultural assertion in order to hold on to something of their own. Women do not inhabit a space of the state as home; women rather inhabit a space of their family as home, a space of much more local relations

The new cinema movement of the 70's and 80's made attempts to explore women's subjectivity, her familial and civic role. Today the audience may ask where the woman at work is? Token attempts to characterise the heroine as a contemporary urban professional – a journalist, a teacher, an artist - are hardly ever developed. Recently Sai Paranjpye's *Saaz* tried to explore female relationships (sibling relationships, mother-daughter relationships) as well as sibling rivalry. Over the last few years there has been a lull in the works of women filmmakers, in this context *Saaz* is significant in offering a narrative is only peripherally touched upon, the examination of the mother's identity and the control of the State over this role is the central issue in Govind Nihalini's *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa*. Shyam Benegal continues his concern with marginalised female narratives – *Mammo* and *Sardari Begum*. The very concepts of gender socialising and gender categories have been questioned in Anil Palekar's *Daayera* and Kalpana Lajmi's *Darmiyaan*. In regional films Aparna Sen's *Yuganta* explores a woman's dilemma between her profession and her home; the break down of relationships in a background of increasing social violence. Santana

Bordoloi portrays the experience of widowhood through three generations of women in *Adyaja*. Mira Nair's film *Kama Sutra* based on the classical Indian text on love and sex. Nair's film exoticises and essentializes female sexuality in India, more as consumer product from the western economy submitting to neo-colonial demands of the market.

Deepa Mehta's Canadian production *Fire* addresses these needs squarely. *Fire* is about a north Indian family and it raises questions about the patriarchal controls in this household, and urgent issue of female identity and sexuality. The older sister-in-law is childless and her husband has lost sexual interest in her. The younger sister-in-law, a newly married wife is looked on as a baby-making machine by her husband who is emotionally involved with a Chinese woman. Finding it difficult to openly challenge the male dominated structure of the family, the two women are drawn close together both emotionally and physically. It is literally through an ordeal of fire that Radha leaves behind this family and walks out to join Sita whom she meets in the refuge of a mosque. Mehta's film explodes the uneasy alliance between family, state and market through an exploration of a lesbian relationship in an Indian context. *Fire* explores ways out of the male gaze as the act of surveillance limits truth to the exclusion of the other. Multifarious and reflexive ways of gazing structure the film, certain key moments represent a female-female gaze which challenges the look of surveillance. If on one hand global transactions are resulting in the manufacture of confused images with the conservative garbed in the new language of today, the strident nationalism of right wing ideology is also effectively stereotyping women and their roles.

Border which is set during the Indo-Pak war of the 70's valorizes war and the men who die fighting for their country against the pronounced enemy - Pakistan. The militant nationalism it uses effectively valorises

the blind mother whose son must leave her to join the army. It romanticises the waiting lover and the wife of those soldiers who never return from the battle field. *Border* whips up the male rhetoric of war and harnesses the three classical female stereotypes - the mother, the wife and the sweetheart - all these subjectivities are sacrificed to the long drawn sequences of actual warfare where the heroes fight valiantly and die for their motherland. the film is an indicator of the limits of possible representation in an increasingly militant state. A search for national identity exploits but precludes the real Indian women - much as it has been seen in *Mother India*. *Border* remains a glaring instance of how nations are forced to privilege national culture and geographical border when protecting themselves in the global arena but at the expense of collapsing culturally different groups within a specific nation.

Although Indian cinema continues to change and evolve, reflecting new trends in gender relations, at least in very traditional Indian cinema women who live by these traditional norms are portrayed as happy and ethical. Women who go against these rules of narrative and culture in films are punished and seen as immoral.

Four Roles of Women

The Changing Role of Women in Bollywood Cinema

These roles and constructions of women are reflected in a great deal of popular Indian Cinema. Four important roles to consider include the ideal wife, ideal mother, the vamp, and the courtesan

The Ideal Wife

This character is represented by sexual purity and fidelity. She must be consistent with traditional Indian roles by honoring the family and depending on the husband. She is closely connected to the domestic

domain.

The Ideal Mother

Indian reference to the mother involves religious suggestion. The country is connected with the mother goddess, Shakti, who represents great strength. The role of the mother in Indian film is often seen as a strong force, such as in *Mother India* (1957).

The Vamp

The vamp in Indian film is modern and imitates western women. Her behavior can include smoking, drinking, and dancing. She can also be quick to fall in and out love. She represents unacceptable behavior and is seen as unwholesome. She is almost always punished for her behavior.

The Courtesan

The courtesan is outside the normal realm of Indian womanhood in that she is a type of prostitute or dancing girl. She embodies sexuality. She is a character who helps with the physical and emotional needs of men. Often in Indian film, she gives the man comfort and care, after which he leaves her to desperately mourn the loss of him.

Sexuality in Indian Cinema

Many of the roles represented here are similar to that of the roles of women in western film. For example, the women are seen as objects of desire. This relates to the representations of romance and the female figure in Indian popular film.

Kissing was unknown in Indian film for a long time. Public displays of affection are associated with western life. However, there are blatant scenes involving sexuality. Although more recent films often

include scenes of overt sexual relations, traditionally Indian film has used three techniques (as categorized by Richards) to convey this sexuality: tribal dress, dream sequences/wet saris, and behind the bush.

Tribal Dress

Because many Indian films involve music and dance, Richards explains, “tribal costumes are used for the exposure of vast expanses of the body, in particular the pelvic region”

Dream Sequences/Wet Sari

Dreams offer the ability to express sexual desires and explore forbidden pleasure. Wet saris are often involved in these dreams and are caused by a downpour in which the woman’s flimsy sari allows for exposure of the female body.

Behind the Bush

The music and dance in films often gives characters the opportunity to run behind the bushes quickly. Afterwards the woman wipes off her lips, insinuating what occurred.

Women centric films in Indian cinema, as is seen, are rare but they do exist. It is true that one cannot ignore the sojourn of woman in Indian Cinema from *Mother India* to *Mirch Masala* to *Chandni Bar* to *Page 3*, *Fashion* and *Heroine*. The patriarchal society has its roots ingrained within the social nexus and often proved by the domination of hero centric cinema. However the breeze of social change has even swept the pillars of art, both being directly proportional to each other. Films are being made keeping in mind the changing social roles of women, their venture, and their transgression from private to public domain, their transgression from the known lands of security towards the unknown depths of uncertainty. One of the early films that dealt with the plight of untouchable was *Achhyut Kanya*.

In the early years of Indian cinema Bimal Roy made a host of films in which his heroines had the lead part to play. Whether it was *Parineeta*, *Sujata*, *Bandini*, *Biraj Bou* and other films were mainly women centric. One of the outstanding commercial hits of all times, *Seeta Aur Geeta* concentrated more on its heroine than the two heroes. Jaya Bhaduri's *Guddi* was one of the early hits where the innocent girl-next-door image of a star-struck teenager became representative of each school-going girl for years to come. A educated wife changes course midway from a happily married woman to a leading politician in *Aandhi*. In *Aakhir Kyon*, Smita Patil portrays a jilted wife who, after the infidelity of her husband, rebuilds her life and becomes a famous writer. Smita Patil also starred in Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* wherein a woman refuses to give in to the pestering of a subehdaar. She saves her honour by killing the wicked man. Smita and Shabana Azmi came together in Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth*. Much later in *Mrityudand*, Shabana Azmi defies society and bears the child of her lover while her husband hides behind a facade of renunciation and celibacy. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* brings lesbianism to the Hindi screen for the very first time. *Filhaal*, starring Sushmita Sen and Tabu, is another feature film where friendship between two women is explored. In this film the woman is ready to bear and carry her friend's child, and give life in a way only a woman can; enacting the role of surrogate mother. In Mahesh Manjrekar's *Astitvaâ*, the soulful Aditi gives birth to a child out of wedlock and shatters the vain world of male vanity when ultimately the truth is disclosed. The film questions the feminist moral concerns through the detailed examination of sexual and familial relationships.

Mrinal Sen made films like *Neel Akasher Neechey* and *Punoscho* are instances of women centred films. *Charulata*, *Devi*, *Teen Kanya*, *Mahanagar*, *Pather Panchali* and other Satyajit Ray movies explore different facets of women. Besides these, Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe*

Dhaka Tara and *Subarnarekha* are considered path breaking female oriented films. Much later it was Aparna Sen whose films questioned the traditional mores that were imposed on women. Her films presented women breaking away from the age old conventions to create a world of their own. *Paroma*, shows a world torn between idealism and realism where the woman tread the path of so-called “promiscuity” only to gain psychological maturity in the long run. *Paromitar Ek Din* and *Sati* even highlight the idiosyncrasies of the patriarchal social cosmos. Rituparno Ghosh. *Dahan*, *Unishe April*, *Bariwali*, *Doshar*, *Chokher Bali* and others can easily be termed as women centric films. Rituporno Ghosh’s “*Dosar*”, is a movie about nuptial infidelity, and the trauma of young woman who laments a relation approximately lost. His movie *Abohoman* traces the pangs of two women torn between affection for one man, within the mappings of meta-theatre genre, a cinema about a cinema. Again, very recently, in “*Shunyo-e-buke*”, a Bengali film by Koushik Ganguly, the protagonist is a flat-chested woman of the 21st century who questions the very basis of judging the worth of a woman by her physical appearance. This hard-hitting film questions the projection of women as sex objects in Indians panoramic scenario.

Other regional films like Assamese cinema have also dealt with women centric films. Bhaben Saikia’s *Agnisnaan*, Jahnu Barua’s *Firongoti*, Dr Shantanu Bordoloi’s *Adajya* and several other films have time and again raised the problems of the contemporary women. Down south films like K.S.Sethumadhavan’s *Stri*, Prema Karanth’s *Phaniyamma*, Girish Kasarvalli’s *Kraurya*, Balu Mahendra’s *Moonram Pirai* or Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s *Mathilukal* treat women as their protagonist.

An interesting phenomenon in Indian films is the vamp. She is a tangible contrast to the all-virtuous heroine in Indian cinema. Quite often as a cabaret dancer, her presence was essentially to add glamour. Popularized by *Cuckoo*, perfected by *Helen*, and followed through by

Bindu and Kalpana Iyer, the vamp once in a while traded places with the heroine.

Films like *Lajja* deal with exploitation of women at various levels of society. Even the English films in India have also come up with the problems that women face. These include domestic violence, stifled aspirations, loneliness, widowhood and others. *Fire*, *Provoked*, *Water*, *Bend It like Beckham*, *Mitr: My Friend* and other films address different women centric problems.

Some of the popular Hindi women centric films till date are *Mother India*, *Seeta Aur Geeta*, *Sau Din Saas Ke*, *Insaaf Ka Tarazu*, *Arth*, *Ek Pal*, *Mirch Masala*, *Khoon Bhari Maang*, *Damini* and *Lajja*.

In the recent times, films like *Dirty Picture* and *Kahaani* 'No One Killed Jessica' *Turning 30* and '7 Khoon Maaf' 'Dor', 'Silsilay' 'Tehzeeb' 'Pinjar' 'Chameli' 'Satta' 'Filhaal' 'Zubeidaa' 'Lajja' 'Chandni Bar' and 'Fiza' brought women into the limelight. People have gladly accepted the new trend in Indian cinema that shows the women in the lead role.

Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture in this century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding art form could ever achieve. A deeper insight into the complex processes of modernization, colonialism, nationalism and freedom for women can be acquired through the Indian cinema.

Mainstream Hindi cinema, pretends to establish the autonomy of women through its narrative, but the image it depicts is far from the reality. The model of the Goddess in Indian mythology always remains present very subtly to create this image. The Mother Goddess "Durga" and her counterparts "Radha" and "Sita" are the most popular icons from the Indian (Hindu) mythology to construct the image of woman in Hindi

cinema. Though the Hindu Goddesses do not necessarily serve as paradigms for present social values, they do demonstrate certain suppositions about female behaviors, powers, desires and characters.

The socially accepted roles of Hindi cinema actress's, are constructed and supported by the Hindu mythology and the epics like "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata" are:

Kamini : - A woman who seduces

Bharya : - A woman who is supported and fed by husband

Ramani : - A sex partner

Jaya : - A woman gives birth to children

The institution of 'Marriage', which enforces the patriarchal values on women is an important aspect of Indian films. Before marriage she could expose her body and seduce with sensual body language, but after marriage she is preferred to wrap herself in costly and colorful 'Sari'. The ideal wife image can be seen in the films '*Gauri*' (1968); '*Devi*' (1970) and '*Karma*' (1986). Rape and Prostitution is glamorized keeping behind its reality of sub-human exploitation. Rape victims and prostitutes are generally destined to commit suicide or are killed in the popular cinema. Popular cinema generally does not allow the rape victims and prostitutes to survive to a decent life. prostitutes play a very vital role in the Indian cinema Right from Dada Saheb Phalke's silent film '*Devdasi*' (1925), V Shantaram's '*Aadmi*' (1941), P C Barua's '*Devdas*' (1955), Guru Dutta's '*Pyasaa*' (1957), Basu Bhattacharya's '*Teesri Kasam*' (1966), Kaamal Amrohi's '*Pakeezah*' (1971), Shyam Benegal's '*Mandi*' (1983), Meera Niar's '*Saalam Bombay*' (1987) to Basu Bhattacharya's '*Aastha*' (1996) -. In B R Ishara's '*Chetna*' (1970), the roles of protutute charecters are impotant.

Vamp characters are riddled in Hindi movie plots. The “vamp” is overtly sexual, as if that alone shows strength. Though stories may demand certain types of characters sometimes, most of the time in Bollywood, the modern, and often “bad,” woman becomes the one in less clothes and the “good” woman is the sacrificing, loyal one, even if it means being humiliated. Women fare better in the indie cinema scene, like “*Dor*” (2006) or “*Fashion*”(2008).

Although woman in mainstream Indian cinema has undergone so many changes in respect of dress code, body language, moral values, style in song and dance sequences, romantic scenes, but all are in surface level. The inherent characteristics of the basic role of “Kamini - Bharya - Ramani - Jaya” have not at all been changed. Whatever may the development at the outer sphere could be seen in the contemporary films; she has to submit herself to the patriarchy. Even she is not allowed to think or take any decision independently.

Quite often there have been elements of rebellion too.

But looking back at the 100 years of Indian cinema, probably it will not be out of place to find that the more they (portrayal of women in Indian films essentially Hindi) have changed the more they have perhaps remained the same.

It can be said that despite the fact that like in Indian literature, in Indian films too the woman has been depicted more than a mere addition to man but as an “autonomous being” finding her own ways.

But films are only extension of the larger Indian society and at times aping the western society – often poorly – the changing face of female protagonists, their on-screen image and the treatment of fairer sex have remained as secondary characters to the more powerful men.

Indeed, film makers across various regions – either Bangla cinema in

Kolkata or Telugu films in Hyderabad and of course Hindi films churned out in large numbers from Mumbai (Bollywood) have essentially based the female characters as their social image off-screen: that of a dutiful wife and making virtue of sacrifice.

Ketan Mehta's 1989 film *Mirch Masala* signals itself clearly to be part of this "alternative cinema." One of the most important indicators of this is the role that the camera plays. Throughout the film it is never seen any female body fragmented. By always keeping the whole body in the frame and zooming in only on the face the camera always attributes person-hood to the women in this film. This is no mean feat.

In *Mirch Masala*, the fragmentation female body is shown to be absent. Its absence is emphasized in the one song sequence which *Mirch Masala* has. The women dance in a circle and it is seen that the lustful Subedar looking at them but the audience never get to see them from his point of view. They are always shown either from a distance, dancing in a group or as one woman at a time with the bottom of the frame at knee height and the top of the frame about a foot or two above her head. The camera as voyeur is repeatedly denied. There are a number of scenes where the Subedar is shown sizing up women. In one scene he looks at Sonbai through a telescope. The audience see him point the telescope and they anticipate the telescopic view of her that almost any other film would provide. The larger scheme of the film is to attack the look, not only in cinema, but in the real world.