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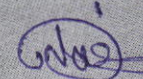
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Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema and Their Changing Roles : Then & Now

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Abstract :

Indian Cinema has undergone varied changes from mythology based stories to more recent, technically improved, flashy and focusing on variety of themes blockbusters since its inception. The first film was made in 1912-13. A historical theme based movie Raja Harishchandra (1913) was the first Indian film which was directed and produced by Dadasaheb Falke, the father of Indian cinema. In this film the female character was played by the male actor as there were no female actresses at that time. So the male artists had to play female roles as women's participation in the films was considered below dignity. Men were considered as the master of the family while women were restricted to home and hearth only. The women belonged to highly patriarchal society were no exception to this. After independence the Indian societies were swept away by the wave of modernization and civilization. Women from rich families joined film industry in 1930 and changed its face dramatically. Devika Rani, Shobhana Samarth, Zubeidaa and Mehtab were the popular heroines of this time. Media also played a pivotal role leading to modernization of societies by changing the face of women. Over past decades, Indian cinema has witnessed a significant change in the way women are depicted through films. This research article is a humble attempt to study the fast changing roles of women portrayed in Indian cinema.

Keywords : Bollywood, Films, Indian Cinema, Hollywood, Actresses, Women.

Introduction :

The Indian film industry is considered as the largest film industry in the world with over 1000 films produced each year in more than 20 languages while Hollywood produces less than 400 films per year. Before referring to the changes, it becomes imperative to understand the importance of Indian cinema in the world today. Indian cinema is the biggest films producing industry of the world.

The Indian film industry developed since the early 1910s. Movies were first made without sound and with the introduction of new technology, films with sound were produced and new elements were introduced in the film productions. "Alam Ara" was the first film with sound released in 193. Hindi language was made the main language used in the films, and song and dance sequences were inserted in the storyline and soon it evolved into a distinct genre of film of its own which is commonly labeled as the 'Bollywood' films that have indeed affected various aspects of our lives. This controversial term was used by the crime fiction writer H. R. F. Keating in 1976. Hindi film actors and producers found it very hard to accept the term and got angry with the comparison of Bollywood to Hollywood.

Early days of Indian Cinema :

In early days, Indian cinema focused on mythological stories and great epics from Ramayana and Mahabharata. Raja Harishchandra was the first Indian cinema that was directed by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913. During the freedom struggle, Indian cinema was used as a medium to demonstrate anger and voice the opinion of nationalist leaders and parties demanding independence from British colonial rule. However after Independence, social problems

and issues were addressed through cinema. The period from 1950s to the late 1970s was considered as the golden era of Bollywood films. This was the time when age-old and rich traditions of rural India, family relationships, customs, norms and ethics of Indian society were portrayed in Indian cinema. Films also showcased the issue of poverty during this time. The characters were taken from the society itself and therefore the audiences could easily identify themselves with the on-screen characters whose lives reminded them of their own.

Changing Images of Women in Indian Cinema : Bollywood Actresses during 1913-1970 :

"Kisan Kanya" was the first coloured feature film which was released in 1937 but it could not gain much attention from the audience. It is only in the 1950s, coloured films became commercially popular as the film songs and dance became a strong factor in the popularity of a film. That is why majority of the songs of 1950s are still very popular. This period witnessed the rise of great Bollywood actors and actresses like Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Nargis, Meena Kumari, Madhubala, Nutan, and others. Films played a vital role in depicting and influencing the social aspects. Even the remuneration, status and roles of the leading females of that era were at par with their male co-actors. During this period female actresses not only played dominant roles along with the male actors but also held a huge responsibility on their shoulders to sell the films in the market. Kaagaz Ke Phool, Mother India, Pakeezah, Half Ticket, and Padosan are some of such wonderful films.

To illustrate let us discuss the film **Kaagaz Ke Phool, Shanti** (Waheeda Rehman) is a famous star who was

introduced to films by the famous director Suresh (Guru Dutta). Suresh meets this orphan girl Shanti by a strange twist of fate and introduces her to films. Suresh is separated from his wife when the film opens. His rights to visit his daughter at boarding school are also withdrawn. Later, they fall in love but never get to express their love for each other. When Pammi (Suresh's daughter) learns about the 'affair,' she persuades Shanti to leave her father alone and tries to reunite her separated parents, but all in vain.

"**Mother India**" was made by the famous director Mehboob in 1957. He endeavours to blend socialistic ideals with the traditional values. This is the story of **Radha** (Nargis Dutt) who marries Shamoo (Raj Kumar) and comes to his village. The film opens with Radha as an old woman being asked to inaugurate a new canal constructed in her village. The rustic people address Radha as the mother of the village and want her to inaugurate the canal. Radha is portrayed as a common woman who is an ideal wife and a daughter-in-law. She is very responsible, intelligent, formidable and determined woman. She is uneducated yet tough and practical. She has the skills, knowledge, and the will to protect and raise her children. She commands respect from her sons, from the villagers, and also from the audience.

Bollywood Actresses during 1970 - 1990 :

The action era began in Bollywood films in 1980s. It undoubtedly brought big changes in the industry. The Bollywood heroines lost their strength and were reduced to a glamorous component of the films, who danced around trees, kidnapped, raped or killed. The ideal woman was portrayed as a submissive and shy, dependent and fragile, usually clad in a sari, while the famous vamps of Bollywood donned bold outfits. Even if we look at the 1970s or 80s, the favourite vamps of that era were some of the first women to smoke, drink or engage in pre-marital sex onscreen.

When talking about the role of women in action films, "**Mirch Masala**" made in 1989 by Ketan Mehta comes to our mind. It is the story of Sonbai (Smita Patil) who works in a chili factory somewhere in the western part of colonial India. Her husband gets a job in the railways and leaves for the city. In the meantime, the Subedar (or tax collector, played by Naseeruddin Shah) arrives to collect taxes and sees Sonbai. He gets attracted to her and asks the Mukhiya to send her to him. The next day she passes by the place where the Subedar has his camp. He stops and grabs her. She somehow manages to free herself from his clutches and slaps him. He asks his soldiers to catch her. She runs into the chili factory where she works. The old Muslim watchman Abu Miyan (Om Puri) takes her in and closes the gates. A parallel thread is that of the Mukhi's wife, the Mukhiain, who is not treated well by her husband. She tries to gather support for Sonbai when she gets to know that

her husband and all the men of the village have surrendered to the Subedar and have agreed to hand Sonbai over to him. But her protest is rudely crushed by the men, and the Subedar accompanied by all the men of the village, reaches the factory. Abu Miyan refuses to open the doors and the Subedar's men break it down and kill him. In the climax of the film the Subedar approaches Sonbai when suddenly the other women in the factory take bags of chili powder and throw them in his face.

In the post-liberalization era of 1990s, some hit films showed a desire for a traditional way of life where women looked after their homes and men earned the bread. The Dhak dhak girl Madhuri Dixit stole the hearts of millions of her audiences after the huge success of this blockbuster film *Hum Apke Hai Kaun*. She also established the trend of heroines who would never put their own dreams ahead of the aspirations and desires of their family. The caring homemaker role of the women was back in trend. The more recent films of late 1990s like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gum*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Dil Toh Pagal Hai*, and *Biwi No.1* all portrayed women as a decorative piece and as homemakers. None of these contemporary young film makers presented women as career women.

Portrayal of Bollywood Actresses in modern Era :

After 1990s, the line between the heroine and vamp disappeared. The heroine dressed as boldly and moved as provocatively as the bad girl of old times. Some critics opined that as an effect of globalization and consumerism where mass production demanded heroines to become more ornamental than real woman. She might be shown dancing in snow-covered Switzerland or Australia but basically sticks to the ideal woman Indian males fantasize about which is being a homemaker. The change of images has not been a sudden one but happened slowly. Woman is portrayed in a derogatory and degrading way in the contemporary mainstream cinema. A girl, victim of a rape, is treated as a moral leper while a womanizer is surrounded by a crowd of beautiful girls. Women in Hindi films play stereotype characters. They are shown as glamorous girl-friends, sacrificing wives and mothers or vamps. They are a mere foil to the male, whatever the role. The shyness is flung to the winds and she sprawls on the ground, making a variety of suggestive poses with the hero. But still she is supposed to be a paragon of virtue.

Conclusion :

The society and the world that we live in are changing and these changes are echoed in the cinema. However, it wouldn't be wrong to say that some of the movies that have been over the years are not just a source of popular entertainment for families and individuals, but they have also acted as vehicles of social churning and transformation. Large number of women working both in urban and rural

areas, the films more often ignored this reality. It was a challenge to find a strong foothold by women in a male-dominated and patriarchal society. But women in Indian cinema have achieved this feat.

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