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## **From Subservient to Assertive, From Confinement to Emancipation, From Silent to Strong: The Changing Role of Women in Indian Movies**

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### **Abstract:**

There is no doubt that a drastic change has occurred in Bollywood and Tollywood movies in terms of their presentation of women character. The manner in which the women are portrayed in movies reflects the status of women in the society too. The journey revolves around the evolution of women from pre-independence era to the contemporary period. Thus, in this paper an endeavour is made to show how the movies directed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provide a voice to the woman of the pre-independence and post-independence era too.

**Keywords: Women, Silent, Strong, Society, Voice, Emancipation, Movies.**

"A woman with a voice is by definition a strong woman. But the search to find that voice can be remarkably difficult. It's complicated by the fact that in most nations women receive substantially less education than men."- Melinda Gates

The emancipation of women and their slow but steady journey to achieve a voice of their own have been well featured by Indian film industry, which began its black and white journey in the year 1913. Since then, Indian cinema has witnessed a consequential vicissitude in the expeditious transmuting role of women as represented in both Bollywood and Tollywood movies. The manner in which the women are portrayed in movies reflects the status of women in the society too. The journey revolves around the evolution of women from pre-independence era to the contemporary period. Thus, in this paper an endeavour is made to show how the movies directed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provide a voice to the woman of the pre-independence and post-independence era too. Ever since the growth, Indian film industry is actively advertising women as promotional devices of a product or service.

Women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are deconstructing the image of an emotionally weak and powerless individual and moving towards the construction of a financially independent woman.

The first Indian featured film 'Raja Harischandra', a religious movie, directed by Khundiraj Gobind Phalke, was released in the year 1913. Though the movie tended to go beyond the traditional mythological narratives, it scarcely provided a space for women as the then stereotypical Indian society was not ready to accept the onscreen portrayal of a woman. However, they were tolerant to employ foreign actresses to expose themselves to the camera. The result was the acceptance of an Australian actress, Mary Evans in the popular film 'Hunterwali'<sup>1</sup> released in the year 1935. In the movie she fights against oppression and even helps the male characters and it is through her, for the first time, the strong woman is undoubtedly given a space. It might be because she was not an Indian woman who was expected to be silent in nature. This clearly indicates that the role and position of a woman is directly proportional to the progressiveness of the society.

The orthodox nature of Indian society can be manifested in the existence of the dichotomy of "inside" and "outside". The conventional Indian society demarcated a specific role and duty for women inside the patriarchal norms— after birth, females were subjects of their father; during youth, they were subjects of their husbands; and during old age, subjects of their son. These stereotypical roles are assigned to the woman and they have inherited the roles, through the ethical Hindu conduct –book namely 'Manusmriti'<sup>2</sup>. Inside this text, the ethical codes are established which governs the lives of women in traditional society, and are articulated through Indian popular cinema.

The role a woman plays on-screen comes under the authorial and directorial power of the director. It is the director, who, often a male, shapes the onscreen portrayal of the woman character. Therefore it is quite natural that the male director's belief and values, which are combined with the viewer's belief and values form the social framework where the identity of the woman character is shaped and constructed based on the socio-cultural context inside the Indian society, will have an impact in silencing her perspective. Moreover, the female characters are designed and given shape by the directors, thus they naturally have the authorial rights to designate their name. In the Indian society names carry semantic values, where the characteristic of a person is determined by his/her designated name given by



his/her family. The naming of character both on-screen and off-screen emphasizes the Indian tradition and family values.

The endeavour of erasing the inside-outside dichotomy that was prevalent in early movies prepared before 1950s was initiated by film-makers like K.A.Abbas, Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt, who, through movies like 'Love in Tokyo'<sup>3</sup> and 'An Evening in Paris', brought fresh zeal in Indian film industry, making history by introducing strong women characters. The indication of their endeavour to transgress the stereotypes can be manifested through the codification of the names of the heroines. The heroine in 'Love in Tokyo' is Asha, which means "hope" in Indian languages; and in 'An Evening in Paris', the heroine is named Deepa that is earthen oil lamp. Igniting a ray of hope, with 'Asha' and 'Deepa' both the Indian society and Indian movies slowly and gradually started their march towards a transnational change.

During 1970's, the movie makers started projecting working women from lower and middle classes as the central characters of their works. For instance in movies like 'Abhimaan' and 'Kala Pathar', Jaya Bachchan and Rakhi respectively played the role of working women to represent the struggle of the lower middle class family of India. In the movie 'Abhimaan' Jaya Bachchan is casted as a singer, whereas in 'Kala Pathar' Rakhee plays the role of a doctor. In 1980's more of silent women were reported of being sexually abused which necessitated the Bollywood actresses to adapt a strong role voiced by the role of cops- Rekha in 'Phool Bane Angare', HemaMalini in 'AndhaKanoon' and Dimple Kapadia in 'Zakhmi Aurat'. But suddenly in the early half of the 90's, the old traditional women, who were struggling for their vice, once again made their revival in the arena of the Mumbai film industry with the biggest hit of the time 'Hum ApkeHaiKaun'<sup>4</sup>. In the movie through the character of Madhuri Dixit the dichotomy of inside-outside system, where the woman would never put their own dreams ahead of the desires of the patriarchal society, was once again established.

The tradition of projecting a typical Indian woman, who remains meek and silent and always obeys the invisible strong ideology of the male dominated society, continues even in some of the twentieth century films like 'KabhiKhushiKabhiGham', 'KuchKuchHota Hai' etc. Apart from that in the movie 'Biwi No.1'<sup>5</sup>, another Block Buster of the time, two contrasted women personalities are presented through the character of Rupali and Pooja. The former one, who is a model, tries to break a marriage; while the latter, who is a conventional

'Sati-Savitri'<sup>6</sup> like figure, through her modesty, chastity and honesty, brings her husband back by forgiving all his misdeeds. Here the names of the two female characters are highly symbolic in nature. The name Rupali means silver, which glitters but is not valued; whereas Pooja, which means an act of praying, stands for the virtuous Indian wife. In 2004, the similar inside-outside dichotomy is portrayed through the characters in the movie 'Aitraaz'.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century woman conditions her own life by moulding herself, which results in moulding not only the outlook of the society but also the prevalent stereotypical norms of it. Thus, she transgresses herself beyond the pre-determined meaning associated with her name and promotes a new outlook by giving birth to a strong woman, who sheds off her silent role inside womanhood. From the passive and silent wife of Dadasaheb Phalke's 'Raja Harischandra' to the long-suffering but strong mother-figure of 'Mother India' and to the sister of 'Sarabjit', the journey of women inside the Indian society has been rather long, non-submissive, and challenging. It is a journey of rejection to the notion of objectification and subjecthood. Woman's body, which has always been used as a medium to satisfy the male gaze, gradually stripes off the masked faces of the phallic order<sup>7</sup> through the powerful portrayal of strong woman characters- whether married, unmarried, maiden, widow, etc.

Widow house has always been considered as a place of confinement and restriction, where women are scarcely allowed a space to enjoy freedom. Thus all the off-screen widow characters are given voice through their onscreen portrayals, captured through the close-shot, where their eyes signify their desire of emancipation. The beyond-confinement space is shown through the bars; by the white, faded colours, etc. The politics behind the notion of women empowerment under the light of widowhood has been unveiled by Rituparno Ghosh in 'Chokher Bali'<sup>8</sup>, an adaptation of Tagore's novel set in the colonial Bengal in between 1902 and 1905. The movie refutes the conventional Hindu cultural ideologies and projects a woman, whose longing for physical gratification and desire for liberation are always silenced. Ghosh's film revolves around the politics of females inside the home and the constant fight among women within the domestic space.

Binodini (played by Aishwariya Roy in the movie 'Chokher Bali'), the protagonist, is given a passive space inside the alien family, where Mahendra and Ashalata's happy married life becomes the signifier of Binodini's suppressed desire. Trapped within the shackles of widowhood; the beautiful, educated and young spirited girl becomes the victim of her own feelings. Though she loves Bihari, Mahendra's friend, yet she gratifies her lust through



Mahendra. Her forbidden passion not only liberates her from the constraints of the silent social role but also makes her a vigorous woman who runs away with Mahendra to satisfy their cherished dreams of having an unconventional family. A Woman, who has always been an object of lust in the phallic dominant order, is seen taking advantage of the social norms. Though strategically Binodini constructs a space to achieve her goals, both Tagore and Rituparno restrain themselves by sticking to the conventional ethical Indian values and probably that may be the reason why both the author (Tagore) and the director (Rituparno) at the end do not even hesitate to portray how Binodini and Mahendra regret for losing their space and getting marginalized inside the family and society.

Binodini's opera-glass is a symbol of her voyeuristic pleasure which she uses to look inside Mahendra and Ashalata's bedroom, defying the social norms. When Binodini saw the "blueish-black" mark of love in Ashalata's shoulder, she not only guides silent Ashalata not to accept the domination of Mahendra but also makes her strong to such an extent that Ashalata pushes Mahendra aside when he tries to hurt her again. But the same mark of love, when discovered by Ashalata on Binodini's shoulder, makes Ashalata silent. This time, the mark of love, unlike Ashalata's mark, is red-suggesting a fresh and new relationship which has dawned in the life of Binodini. The ignorant Ashalata is still unaware of the ironical situation. Colour always plays a symbolic role by providing the viewer an implicit indication. For instance, here the colour Red stands for fertility and married life, in contrast to black, which is as an ominous sign, indicating the replaced position of the women in Mahendra's life.

Implication of situation through colour codification can be manifested throughout the movie. Ashalata's red saree, red sindoor<sup>9</sup>, and her golden jewellery are seen with greed by Binodini, who satisfies her wish when, one day, Ashalata offers her jewellery to Binodini. Binodini wears the jewellery inside Ashalata's bedroom over her white saree, thus defying the prescribed social dress and transgresses the social conventions of widowhood. When Mahendra and Bihari discover Binodini wearing jewellery, Binodini feels embarrassed and leaves the room. This awkwardness of Binodini seems to be her actual realization of sterile widowhood which gets reflected in her assertions:

"I have three identities-I am a young woman, educated and a widow but all have eclipsed my real identity.....I am also flesh and blood."

Her role of the archetypal seductress demarcates spaces of social identity via the strategic use of clothing and adornment. Binodini's longing for freedom gets expressed in her letters to Ashalata where she discloses her desire of selfhood and implicitly disapproves the norms of the then society,

“beyond the kitchen, courtyard and shutters and petty rules of home life”.

'Water'<sup>10</sup> set in the pre-independent India of 1938, upholds the picture of that society where the child marriage was yet not abolished, widow re-marriage was not yet accepted and the child was married to an old man and after the death of her husband she was sent to widow house. 'Water' exposes the life of two widows – Chuya (below 10 years) and Kalyani (early 20's). The widow house is headed by a master pimp who in exchange of capital sends the young widows to the zamindars. Kalyani, forced into this prostitution, falls in love with Narayan who proposes to marry her. Ironically, he discovers that Kalyani has been his father's prostitute. Despite knowing the truth, he still wants to marry her and becomes ready to abandon his father. Kalyani, on the other hand, has already committed suicide, proving the phallic order to be stronger than the desires of the silent widowhood. Next in line is Chuya, who is sent to the zamindar, who is exploited before Shakuntala (who has always been empathetic towards Kalyani and Chuya) tries her best to save her. Contravening the widow head, Shakuntala gives the child to Narayan. Through this journey, Shakuntala loses her space inside the widow house, but her voicing shows that the silent Kalyani should have been like the vigorous Shakuntala. 'Water' was not accepted by the Indian mass and the actress Deepa Mehta had to move to Sri Lanka for the completion of her shoot. This reflects that the Indian audience is always very critical towards those who endeavour to contravene the Indian norms and traditions. The movie was claimed to be anti-Hinduistic and thus the Indian mass preferred to preserve the concept of holiness associated with river Ganga and the town of Varanasi. As a result the corruption that the movie tried to underscore through its representation of the widows was not accepted by the Indian viewers.

The desire of widowhood is balanced in Kunal Basu's short story 'The Japanese Wife'<sup>11</sup> which is adopted onscreen by Aparna Sen. The epistolary love story of Snehamoy Chakraborty of Shonai Island and Miyang, a Japanese is represented in contrast with the relationship of Snehamoy and Sandhya, a widow, who is given a space in Snehamoy's house (not in his life of which she was always desirous of). The platonic love between Snehamoy and Miyang is interrupted by the widow's arrival. The physical presence





which was absent inside the pen-married relationship was transgressed by Snehamoy, when he could not resist an intercourse with the widow. He blames himself:

“What good is a man who isn’t loyal?”

and writes to Miyang about his transgression. Soon he meets with his untimely death and Miyang steps the Indian soil as an Indian wife accepting the Indian widowhood but unaware of the social norms- she still wears the conch shell, which was defying her external white-clad look. Both the woman in Snehamoy’s life works as devices of binaries, where both are silent and strong depending on the situation. Both try to discover the meaning of their life through Snehamoy. The presence of the widowhood in Sandhya’s life acts as the absence of Snehamoy in the Japanese wife’s life and vice-versa. Both are dragged to one level at the death of the protagonist- a representative of the phallic order-the signifier of patriarchy. What is noteworthy in the movie is that the representative of the patriarchy does not suppress the female characters, rather tries to provide both the females a strong voice- transgressing out of their silent social and familial norms.

The woman is made stronger in Rituparno Ghosh’s movie ‘Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish’<sup>12</sup> which is based on the story of Chitangada from ‘Mahabharata’. This is an adaptation of an actor’s life known as Rudra. Despite being a man, though has always played the role of a female, he wants to become a woman. He is, as if, thus branded as being effeminate by nature. He falls in love with Partha, the percussionist. During the course of their relationship, they decide to adopt a child but same-sex couples are not permitted to adopt children. So Rudra endeavours to transmute his gender to embrace womanhood. As Rabindranath Tagore has reflected through his ‘Chitrangada’, how the same feeling dawns upon Chitrangada (of ‘Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish’) where she curses her identity and is ashamed of her existence when Partha decides to stay with another woman. The movie revolves around one question- how far is the choice of individual subject hood being granted or legitimized inside the Indian society. Though Indian society cannot accept the queer relationships, the state of motherhood as a signifier of respect is still prevalent in the Indian culture, yet the journey of woman continues making her even stronger, both on-screen and off-screen.

The Indian women have always been fighting against the dominant phallic order to achieve a voice of their own by defying the social conventions and traditions and Indian film industry has never hesitated to pay homage by upholding their off-screen struggle in on-



screen. It may be the reason why a drastic change has occurred in Indian movies in terms of their presentation of feminine self. The women in off-screen have successfully attained a strong position inside the society and in on-screen their heroic roles in some recent movies have been gladly accepted by Indian mass. Thus we find strong woman playing the main leads as Vidya Bagchi in 'Kahaani'; Meera in 'NH10'; Shivani Shivaji Roy in 'Mardaani'; Mangte C Mangte Chungeijang Komhungeijang Kom in 'Mary Kom'; Mastani and Kashibai in 'Bajirao Mastani'; Neerja Bhanot in 'Neerja'; Madhi in 'Saala Khadoos'; Abha Mathur in 'Jai Gangaajal'; Kia in 'Ki & Ka'; Dalbir Kaur in 'Sarbjit'; Meghna in 'Hemlock Society'; Arati Mishra and Sahana Choudhury in 'Memories in March'; Aparna Dutta, Nancy Sen, Damini in 'Teen Kanya'; Begum Jaan in 'Rajkahini', Shabana in 'Naam Shabana'; Vijaya Raje Scindia's Biopic 'Ek Thi Rani Aisi Bhi'; Devki in 'Mom'; Shruti in 'Jagga Jasoos'; Usha Parmar, Rehana Abidi, Leela and Shireen in 'Lipstick Under my Burkha'; Jaya in 'Toilet: Ek Prem Katha'; Zoya in 'Tiger Zinda Hai'; and many female characters in 'Bahubali: The Beginning' and 'Bahubali 2: The Conclusion' with strong female characters like Devsena and Sivagami; in 'Padmavat' Rani Padmavati as the protagonist, Niana Mathur as the protagonist in 'Hichki', etc. These roles clearly indicate that the modern film narratives have started providing space to strengthen their story, told from their perspective, making them strong, leaving behind their silent image which is finding its root inside the Indian mindset.

#### Notes:

1. The movie *Hunterwali*, directed by Homi Wadia is a Hindi movie, produced in 1935.
2. Ancient legal text among the many Dharmasastras of Hinduism.
3. The movie *Love in Tokyo*, directed by Pramod Chakravarty is performed by Joy Mukherjee, Asha Parekh which was a Hindi movie, produced in the year 1966.
4. The movie *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*, directed by Sooraj R. Barjatya is performed by Madhuri Dixit, Salman Khan which was a Hindi movie, produced in the year 1994.
5. The movie *Biwi. No.1*, directed by David Dhawan is performed by Karisma Kapoor, Salman Khan, Susmita Sen which was a Hindi movie, produced in the year 1999.
6. Sati and Savitri are established mythological figures who are used as symbols for their devoted love towards their husbands Shiva and Satyavan respectively.
7. An established signifier resembling phallus which is the symbolic representation of the patriarchal society.



8. The movie *Chokher Bali*, directed by Rituparno Ghosh is performed by Aishwariya Rai, Prasenjit Chatterjee, Rima Sen, Tota Roy Chowdhury which was a Bengali movie, produced in 2003.
9. Traditional red or orange coloured cosmetic powder worn as a mark of marriage by the women on their forehead.
10. The movie *Water*, directed by Deepa Mehta, performed by Seema Biswas, Liza Roy, John Abraham, Sarala Kariyawasam, Manoram is in Hindi, produced in 2005.
11. The movie *The Japanese Wife*, directed by Aparna Sen. Performed by Rahul Bose, Raima Sen, Moushumi Chatterjee, Chigusa Takaku which was in Bengali, produced in the year 2010.
12. The movie *Chitrangada*, directed by Rituparno Ghosh, performed by Rituparno Ghosh, Jisshu Sengupta is in Bengali, produced in 2012.
13. *Chitra* is a play in One- Act by Rabindranath Tagore.

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