Portrayal of Women in Highest Grossing Indian Films in 2022

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Abstract:

The paper aimed to study the representation of women in Indian films by visually analyzing the portrayal of women. This qualitative research analyzes four highest grossing Bollywood movies of the year 2022, to present the female representation in Bollywood movies. Study shows that women are usually portrayed submissive and their roles latent in movies. Female characters tend to play the 'damsel in distress'. Women do play variety of roles in the movies, yet these characters are limited the stereotypical representation of women, usually dependent on others to move ahead. Female characters do act as a catalyst to move the plot forward but never alone. It can be concluded that though characters are particularly modernized yet their representation are regressive in nature. Women in movies and their roles have evolved with time but there is still a long way ahead to cover.

Keywords: Bollywood, Cinema, Films, Women, Female Characters, Society, Indian, Female Representation, Visual Observation

1. Introduction

Films generally create and affect people's opinions, construct social and cultural images and reinforce the dominant culture as well. Films change the mindset of the people and instil new cultural, social and political concepts. Films influence society in different ways and affect people's personal lives. Films affect the society on both macro as well as micro level. It has a behavioral impact on people.

Right from the beginning of Indian cinema, role of women in films and as a whole in the industry has been a reflection of the society. From the early commercial movies where female characters tend to be submissive and ideal for the society to today's outspoken and somewhat blunt portrayal of women has failed to do justice to women in the society. Women have been patronized to the extent where they refuse to leave abusive surroundings despite being emotionally, mentally and physically abused. Women have been sacrificed too often for what society believes to be a greater good or her duty as a woman.

Owing to the change of perception toward women in the society, roles played by women have also changed gradually. Though how these roles are played out on the screen is a debatable question. Literature also suggests how cinema is changing the cultural identity of India, in terms of how we as a society see our women. How women are portrayed in the films is a cause for concern in the society. Certain questions like, how female representation is being attempted? How does the Indian cinema treat its female

characters, narratives or women in general? Are crucial in altering stereotypical and comatose mindsets of people, turning them into active active film audiances rather than passive film watchers.

2. Aims & objectives

2.1 To Observe the Portrayal of Women in Top Five Highest Grossing Indian Films on IMDB.

2.2 To Identify the Female Portrayal in Films in Current Scenario.

3. Methodology

Qualitative Research method has boon adopted. Visual observations have been made to analyze the portrayal of women in films in India.

Given the nature of Qualitative Research, Purposive Sampling has been adopted.

Selected films are highest grossing for the year 2022.[1]

4. Literature Review

4.1 The Stereotypical Portrayal Of Women In Commercial Indian Cinema (University of Houston) Sowmya Nandakumar May 2011.[2]

According to the research findings representation of women in Indian cinema suggest that in commercial Indian Cinema, grossing highest at the box office, the portrayals are generally stereotypical in nature. Roles played by women tend to be subservient to the male counterpart.

The most prominent roles played by women were of mother, wife, vamp, prostitute, comic, stripper, girlfriend, vamp, etc. These roles mostly comprise of the prostitute, mother or sister, the submissive wife, the vamp and the girlfriend who feeds the male fantasy and have minimal role in carrying the plot forward. The reasons behind these roles being popular are socio-cultural aspect, patriarchy or male dominance in Indian society, popular mythologies which Indian cinema relies heavily on caters to he male fantasy. The viewers have certain preconceived notions and belief systems which they expect the cinema to serve and the business demands it to be served. This makes the dominant stereotypical portrayal more concrete.

The discussion carried out in the research on the films such as Fire (1996) and Water (2005) it is clear that out of the box and valiant attempts of portraying female characters or women centric stories are not welcomed in the Indian society. Propaganda and violence are prominent themes in Indian cinema. This was a subjective analysis and could be helpful in further exploring the topic quantitatively or mixed methods. Most films analyzed were not highest grossing in terms of box office collection but were dis cussed at the national level for their subject matter. The research find that cinema shows a stereotypical image of women in the Indian society. It creates further room for discussion on female portrayal in Indian cinema and its repercussions on the Indian masses.

4.2 New Femininities Post feminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity, Palgrave Macmillan.ISBN: 978-0-230-29452-3[3]

The book contains a collective of original essays on post-feminist sensibilities and gender relations issues

[1] Jha, A. (2022, December 30). Highest Grossing Bollywood Movies of 2022 by Box Office collection & OTT Most Viewed - Bollymoviereviewz. Bollymoviereviewz. https://www.bollymoviereviewz.com/2022/12/highest-grossing-bollywood-movies-of-2022-by-box-office-collection-ott-most-viewed.html

[2] Nandakumar, S. (2011). The Streotypical Portrayal of Women in Commercial Indian Cinema. https://uh-ir.tdl.org/handle/10657/217

[3] Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2011). New femininities : postfeminism, neoliberalism, and subjectivity. In Palgrave Macmillan eBooks. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB14406569

of sexuality, race, class, and geography. The book comments on contemporary culture and fast paced technological growth, global connectivity, neoliberalism dominance and post feminism. It focuses on various disciplines and approaches, all the while focusing on celebrity magazines and makeover shows the study female migrants, 'mail order brides' and women who *repudiate feminism.*

The book emphasizes on examining gender, media and cultural studies. The book gives insight into neoliberalism and post feminism creating new identities and subjectivities.

4.3 Portrayal of Women in Different Eras of Indian Cinema (Pallavi Jha, Ph.D. SSRG International Journal of Humanities&Social Science (Mumbai India).[4]

The research discusses how cinema plays its role in molding audience's opinions, constructing women's images, and in reinforcing the dominant cultural and social values existing within the Indian society. Commercial cinema serves as the most crucial in disseminating cultural insights and knowhows of the Indian society. The research giving the example of the movie '**Abhiman**' discusses how the women of late 70s in the Indian cinema began being assertive in nature and how this resulted in the depiction of realism in Indian cinema, in terms of their female portrayals. With the advent of globalization people changed their outlook, standards of living, dressing sense, etc. Change in how people began to think started being evident, better connectivity turned out to be crucial in changing people's behavioral patterns. This impacted the film making process to a greater extent. New genres emerged post the 1990s liberalization, the gangster genre witnessed in films in 1990s and post 2000 received much success in the industry. This popularized the item song concept in the movies. The lewd body image and its discourse in the movies and its success furthers strengthened the body image issues.

It is evident in research findings that the portrayal of women has been changing over time. According to the discussions carried out in the research paper the over the top and stylistic portrayal of women in The Indian cinema gradually disappeared over time. Women's portrayal in the Indian cinema has changed considerably leading to a more dynamic and layered nature over the time. Rather than being one dimensional, now we can witness a more refined and complex portrayal of women in the Indian cinema.

4.4 Changing Roles of Women in Indian Cinema, (Ruchi Agarwal, Jan 2023, Mahidol University International College, Nakorn Pathom, Thailand (http://surl.li/gzygu)[5]

The research dwells on the history of Indian cinema, from 1930s silent Raja Harischandra to 1931's Alamara the Bollywood evolved. Kisan Kanya in 1937 introduced colors to the Bollywood. Then the World War 2 impacted the Bollywood industry, then the Indian freedom movement and later the partition had its toll as well. It was 1950s when films started getting recognition with introduction of songs and music. Initially the cinema relied mostly on the mythologies, the during the freedom struggles it was a mouth piece to vent out the anger of masses and later became a tool for social change as well.

The movies like Mother India, showed a typical portrayal of a woman as a mother, wife and daughter, which was stereotypical in nature but still showed a strong female image to the audiences.

By 1980s the Bollywood heroes emerged and the Bollywood heroines started losing their charm to the hero. Movies like Mohra in the 1990s once again visible female characters, but these characters were still dependent on their male counterparts. Films became more materialistic and glimmery. Movies like Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, Dil Toh Pagal Hai, Biwi No.1, etc. had no active female

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[4] Pallavi Jha , Ph. D Scholar (April 2021). Portrayal of Women in Different Eras of Indian Cinema, Social Science, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India.

[5] Ruchi Agarwal Mahidol University International College, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. Changing Roles of Women in Indian Cinema. Volume 14, Number 2 (May - August), 2014http://surl.li/gzycp

characters.

There is a long way ahead but still Bollywood still sticks to its somewhat Indian values and shows Indian politics and social aspects of life in films and depicts the Indian society and culture in films.

4.5 IMPACT OF WOMEN PORTAYAL IN BOLLYWOOD CINEMA AMONG YOUTH OF JHARKHAND, Ankur Das, Arka Jain University JMC (H)[6]

The research studies the impact of women's representation in the Bollywood films among Jharkhand Youths. This study relies on both primary and secondary data.

Research finds that Cinema has been a necessary part of every Indians's life for past hundred years or more. People in all generations have had their own interests in terms of what cinema has to offer. Portrayal of women largely depends on the people of the contemporary times. Apart from commercial cinema, parallel cinema has its audience as well, which values good depictions and wants more than entertainment. Research finds that more than 74% of the respondents think that there is a positive portrayal of women in Bollywood and 26% think otherwise, 45% of the respondents agree that cinema objectifies women, 59% think that Bollywood can have a positive impact, 37% think otherwise. 50% respondents believe that female centric films can have a positive impact on the society, 43% believe that Bollywood depicts a stereotypical image of women.

5. An Analysis of Hindi Women Centric Films in India; Sirjit Sarkar (Univ. of Louisville, Master of Arts Dept. of Sociology, December, 2012.[7]

The research studies Hindi language women centric movies. It is a content analysis of movies keeping in mind the themes revolving around problems concerning women in particular. The research finds that parallel universe is serious and artistic in its portrayal of women and middle cinema is basically meant for people, is a cross between the main stream cinema and parallel artistic cinema. It contains traits from both types of cinemas and hence encourages social changes in how society sees it's women. It brings problems faced by women to the forefront of discussion. The study starts the premise of the research starts with how women face different treatment within the society and films in particular. Literature reviewed in the research describes in great detail how women are portrayed in commercial films and why these are inspired the Hollywood. Advent of artistic and middle cinema has been described as well. The researcher has based their research on a few major points, *First* Feminist & Feminist Film Theory, keeping in mind the portrayal of women; *Secondly*, The Critical Tradition describing power dynamics within in the society; *Thirdly,* Theory of Globalization and Hybridity. *Fourthly*, how the theory of Pop-Culture applies to the Indian culture. In short, this research is a discourse analysis of socio-cultural impact of women centric movies, how artistic and commercial cinema differs in terms of portrayal of women, how it portrays the challenges posed by their surroundings and how women handle these problems within a patriarchal society. It also delves into the differences between the male and female perspectives. The research was limited in its choice of analyzing only Hindi films given the time frame researcher had at hand. Sample size was relatively small considering limited data availability on the topic concerned. Thirdly, the research could only analyze the on-screen content not what goes behind the camera.

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[6] Ankur Das (2022). IMPACT OF WOMEN PORTAYAL IN BOLLYWOOD CINEMA AMONG YOUTH OF JHARKHAND , Dissertation submitted to the department of Journalism and Mass Communication in , Arka Jain University for the partial fulfilment of the Bachelor Degree in JMC (H).http://surl.li/gzydt

[7] Sarkar, Srijita, "An analysis of Hindi women-centric films in India." (2012). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper 1265. https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/1265

6. **Representation of Women and Identity in Bollywood Films by Priya Shah, University of Illinois, Chicago.**[8]

The researcher has conducted a thematic study of three movies in this particular research, Dilwale *Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995), Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna (2006),* and *Dear Zindagi (2016),* where the most visible themes were Independence, Desire, traditional Value and Identity. The research has focused mainly on these four themes while discussing and analyzing the given sample movies. Independence was discussed in terms of the female characters take charge of their lives and make decisions of their own in their lives. Desire was studies based on how the female characters in the stories go after what the want in life. Traditional Indian Values were defined as value systems and norms the female characters adapt and uphold to. Identity has been discussed in terms how the afore mentioned three themes create or mold the female identity and how these representations shape the female leads identity and how individuals represent their being.

The thesis has explored the sample films based on these four themes and found that all females came from rich backgrounds but their genders led them to mountain of problems in life and these challenges shaped their identity to a great extent. It explores how media portrays women in films and its implication in the society. The research also points out that these films had a certain time frame and when a film went out of the box in terms of female portrayal it can affect the society on a whole.

The research was limited to small selection of movies from different decades; hence the researcher can only argue how women were portrayed in a specific time frame. More comprehensive research needs to be attempted.

7. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Top four Highest Grossing Films of the Year have been visually analyzed to see how women are portrayed in Indian movies, what roles they play, how crucial they are to the plot.

7.1 Brahmastra Part One: Shiva - ₹ 436.40 cr

The fillm begins with a guest appearance by Sharukh Khan as the 'scientist' who knows a secret capable of annihilating the entire universe i.e., the **Brahmastra**.The villain along with her two sidekicks are hell-bent on knowing this secret.

Characters in the film are introduced in the typical Bollywood manner i.e., the upbeat and over the top fashion. The male lead *DJ Shiva* played by **Ranbir Kapoor** in the most Bollywood manner follows *Isha*, played by **Alia Bhatt** and asks her to accompany him to an unknown place. Isha willingly follows him along with her friends. Owing to the class difference between Isha and Shiva, movie attempts to portray the same as a hurdle. The movie makes every effort to make audience root for Shiva (who is an orphan and is struggling to make ends meet) as a superhero.

Isha, brought-up in London, without doubt follows him to Varanasi and then Himalayas without considering her dreams and life based on a dream, which is convenient for the plot and is expected from her character as the male lead's Love Interest. Alia Bhatt's Character seems to be purposefully weak and follows Ranbir's character without giving anything a single thought. The exaggerates this as love and like most other female characters (with few exceptions) she is supposed to blindly trust the male lead without question. Her dialogues carry no weight and her character just affirms what the male lead says. Her

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[8] Shah, Priya V (2020): Representation of Women and Identity in Bollywood Films. University of Illinois at Chicago. Thesis. https://doi.org/10.25417/uic.13475046.v1

character has no depth and her existence nowhere helps carry the plot further in the story. Isha serves as an eye-candy for the viewers and the male lead as well. Packed with loads of action yet almost none performed by the female characters. All the female characters are there in the plot as mere spectators to what men have to offer to the plot and story. The movie successfully delivers the hyperbole and fails terribly in delivering anything substantial in terms of portrayal of women in society, fictional or otherwise. Isha's character serves as showpiece and the story would still be the same if her character is erased. She obediently follows Shiva and has no voice in the story and no role in carrying the plot further.

7.2 Drishyam 2 - ₹ 344.65 cr

The Indian Cinematic universe has rarely been able to do justice in portrayal of female characters and Drishyam Franchise is certainly no exception either. The main conflict arises in the plot when Varun films the eldest daughter in the story while bathing and tries to make her submit into giving him sexual favors. He blackmails her that if she refuses to do the same, he would release the video. He somehow finds her home and now asks the mother to do the same instead, this escalates the situation and he is eventually killed in the process. The mother, the daughter and Varun all three try to take control of the video, things go out of hand, panic takes over and he is killed in the process. This sets the Drishyam plot into motion. This incident is the central conflict of the film and sets the narrative into motion i.e., the main lead's attempt to protect his family from going to jail for Varun's murder.

It is of importance to note that the main conflict in the plot arises owing to shame revolving around a woman's body and nudity. The bigger concern here is the reputation that could possibly be tarnished if the particular clip was released in the public domain. This delivers a strong message about how little agency women have over their body and any or everything associated with it. It does not matter if she as a woman had an active role in making or releasing of the video. The only thing that matters is that the clip tarnishes her image according to the social and societal constructs created around a female body and reputation associated with it. Drishyam delivers a typical patriarchal setup in so many ways. The entire film revolves around how the male lead is required to protect the family and save both females in the plot who have now no part in carrying the plot further. The story nowhere tries to give assurance that a woman's life is more than just her body. The film revolves around a society's insecurity and small-mindedness associated with a woman's body. What the audience forgets as the story proceeds is that Varun was an abuser and had it coming owing to his actions. What he was doing was crime, blackmailing a woman with obscene material is a punishable offence and legal action was required, but possibly it would not have served the plot. It was very clear how little security we as a society provide our women. This again shows how little agency women have over their own body.

7.3 The Kashmir Files - ₹ 340.92 cr

The film attempts to deliver an emotional story revolving around the real-life events that took place during the rise of militancy in Kashmir, when the Kashmiri Hindus became it's target roughly between 1989-90. The movie shows a typical representation of women, where women are shown carrying out usual roles. There are four main female characters, Radhika Menon (Pallavi Joshi); Sharda Pandit (Bhasha Sumbly); Laxmi Dutt (Mrinal Kulkarni) and a University Student (Vrinda Kher). Unfortunately, all these characters fall prey to the trope of either a good or a bad woman. Pallavi Joshi's character as Radhika Menon is a distinctively negative character, broadly based on the writer Arundhati Roy, reeking of nationalism and hegemonic masculinity. Bhasha Sumbly as Shradha Pandit represents a good woman with very little agency of her own. As for Mrinal Kulkarni's character i.e., Laxmi Dutt, she has no active role in the plot

and the story wouldn't have been any different if she ceases to exist. Other female characters have no effect on the story whatsoever.

There can be no debate regarding the fact that movies based on real life events can never be judged out its context. Kashmir Files is no exception and can only be understood in the context of the events that took place around the time. Though one thing can be seen quite clearly even without the particular context or any context for there can never be a justification for violence and hatred faced by women during the times of conflict. Be it any civilization women are almost always on the receiving end of the violence and they become the easy target. Situation that has been depicted the Kashmir Files is no different, most female characters were based on actual victims of violence during the incident.

Girija Tickoo was a government school lab assistant, married to a Kashmiri Pandit, she was sexually assaulted and brutally murdered during the outbreak of violence in Kashmir. Overall condition of women depicted in the movie during the Kashmir Violence was somewhat similar to what is evident in any such situation. Women and children are always the ones to suffer the consequences of war even if they have no active role in it. Women were easy targets and could be tormented in ways men would never have been, their sexuality is often weaponized by the society against their own selves. We can see that is exactly what happened. Movies are basically y a reflection of how or what the society that it is an artifact of is. Hence, the same gets communicated through the movies.

7.4 Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2

The opening scene in the movie starts with a stereotypical display i.e. When the male protagonist Ruhan played by Kartik Aryan delivers a misogynistic dialogue, Bag me bomb nahee hai, bomb ka bag hai;(bag does not contain the bomb, but belongs to a bomb). Though the film collected a huge amount of 260 crores, but at the same time it strengthens the societal stereotypes that we, as a society need to do away with. The film follows the typical Bollywood stereotype of a woman falling over her sister's husband and the male counterpart has not been given responsibility. The plot is as such that no woman has any substantial role in subduing the witch (Anjulika played by Tabu), the male protagonist had to come to rescue. Other than that, no female character had a substantial role in the plot, which is not new for Bollywood.

8. CONCLUSION: Findings and Observations

With this study we can conclude that though portrayal of women in the films has changed significantly but not to the point where we may confidently say that it is actually progressive in terms of how women are represented in the movies. The nature of portrayal of women is still extremely regressive in nature. Now it can be debated that since cinema is actually a mirror to the society it is created into, but it still has a responsibility to uplift the culture it is a part of rather than reinforcing the same old objectification and insignificant portrayal of women in films just to woo the audience. The misogynistic representation of women does not just question how men see the women in society or how the society sees women but also how the women see themselves as well. Film texts have potential to be studied to have a better picture of how movies view the society as well as how people see the films, for this give or take inevitable.

9. Significance of the Study

This paper has attempted to present how Indian Cinema views its female characters; how important female characters are to the plot. The study attempts to bring to attention why it is important to further conduct a large-scale study of Indian movies to asses the female representation and its impact on the society.

When we talk about women in films there are so many adjectives attached to their roles, attire, how they

carry themselves as characters and individuals both, how the society sees them, how they rather should be (according to the moral policing of society), and we as researchers as well. The crucial thing while conducting such a study is to keep in mind that a spade needs to be called a spade, which would lead to further polished analysis of female representations in movies. This particular study aims to acts as a stepping stone for the same and pave the way for future research.

10. Limitations

The obvious limitation of this study is that given the time and resources at hand only four selected films (considering the sampling technique) have been analyzed. There are numerous dimensions untouched in this study, this research has solely focused on visual representation.

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