

**THE LEGAL VIDYA**

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**THE METAPHORICAL AGENCY OF “INDIAN WOMAN”  
THROUGH CINEMATIC LENS**

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***“Preeti, chunni theek karo”***

**[Film: Kabir Singh]**

The maternal representation of India as a nation that rebelled against the oppressive colonial rule is a common metaphor used to express nationalism. As part of their “civilizing mission”, the British justified their governance on the pretext of barbaric traditions which undermined the plight of women. In-order to rationalise the same, the British codified laws which meant hegemony of Brahmanical religious text. The agency of women remained centric to these scriptures, which were to be re-defined by the Hindu patriarchs. Thus, the nationalist struggle became a call for duty for men to protect their Indian women that signified purity and chastity from imperialism which aimed at delineating traditional ethos of Indian womanhood.

The national construct of the Indian woman according to Partha Chatterjee characterizes the divine potentials of self-sacrifice, generosity, devotion, and femininity which then symbolises nation.<sup>1</sup> Indian Cinema has captured this construct and continues to define “pure” womanhood as a functionary of Indian culture. According to Charu Gupta, the metaphor of mother gave Hindi language, cow and Indian woman a deeper

<sup>1</sup> Partha Chatterjee, ‘Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India’ (1989) 16(4) American Ethnologist, 622 <[www.jstor.org/stable/645113](http://www.jstor.org/stable/645113)> Accessed 2 June 2021.

meaning and was used in all to send distinct messages that perhaps revealed deep paradox.<sup>2</sup> The representations of Indian womanhood is capitalised by Bollywood through establishment of female dichotomies—the dutiful and sexually pure woman versus the ‘loose’ woman.<sup>3</sup> The analysis of these stories and representations sheds light on the common image of an Indian woman known for her divine feminine character such that her body becomes a dwelling site for oppression.

Set in the backdrop of patriarchal society, it is advanced that morality of an “Indian Woman” is subjected to her chastity. To this extent, the male members of the society constantly need to ensure a mechanism of security of their women which otherwise embeds the idea of “Bharat Mata” or *holy mother land*. Consequently, anything that threatens to dilute this model of Indian womanhood constitutes a betrayal of all that it stands for: nation, religion, God, the Spirit of India, culture, tradition, family.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the hysteria about preservation of traditional values by reiterating the agency of women rests with their men has become a common notion.

The research paper aims to assimilate various representations of what constitutes Indian womanhood in Bollywood which to a great extent projects a misogynistic thread. More often than not, the filmmakers try to blur the reality by adding comic sequences around the issue. On the contrary, the filmmakers such as Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair accentuated the fractures of Indian culture and traditions by portraying their women protagonists with voice. These films gained diminished viewership and controversial screening because of the unconventional portrayal of women which directly affects the image of “Mother India”. The paper furthers this observation by defining agency of women in terms of bodily integrity and sexuality.

## **SEXUAL SUBALTERN CURTAINED BY TRADITIONS**

Through Foucault's understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power, as well as Gramscian concept of hegemonic common sense, Edward Said deconstructed Western conceptions of the “exotic east” in his book *Orientalism*.<sup>5</sup> It was formed primarily as a colonial discourse and a foundation for postcolonial studies. ‘Orientalism developed as a “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient” through the mechanisms of knowledge generation, political control, cultural domination and state authority.’<sup>6</sup> This process of generation of knowledge resulted in emergence of literature for the Third World which embodied assumptions by the colonial powers and further shaped the nationalist struggle. For instance, the British applied the principle of private and public domain to affix the gender-roles. The gender-roles within the social

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<sup>2</sup> Charu Gupta, ‘The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India ‘Bharat Mata’, ‘Matri Bhasha’ and ‘Gau Mata’ (2001) 47 Economic and political weekly, 4292.

<sup>3</sup> Subeshini Moodley, ‘Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking through an “Accented” Cinema: The Construction of Indian Women in the Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta’ [2003] Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity, 66.

<sup>4</sup> *Supra* (n) 1, 627.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Anirudh Deshpande, ‘Colonial Modernity and Historical Imagination in India’ (2011) 72 Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 1311.

sphere identified the home and world dichotomy which defined the ideological framework within which nationalism answered the women's question.<sup>7</sup> The popular literature in this aspect lacked an accurate image of indigenous woman.

The post-colonial theorists remarked that in an attempt to justify their "burden" for taming the natives, imperialism created a distant body of literature that lacked certain voices such as that of Dalits, women, minorities etc. Gayatri Spivak articulated that 'subaltern (woman in this case) cannot speak because, as such, she is not heard by the privileged of either the First or Third World.'<sup>8</sup> This justifies that the presumed contradiction that the movies which depicted women as expressive of their sexuality and desire were considered anti-thetical to the Indian way of life, cultures and traditions, thus, to the very-existence of India as a nation. To this extent, the common assumption of how an Indian woman should maintain herself was the resultant of the discussion on the meaning of culture and its relationship to sexual identity.<sup>9</sup> These assumptions began to form the basis of Cinematic trend as well.

The debate over legitimacy of culture and subverted sexuality of women was depicted through Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*. The film unwinds the romance between two women Neeta (name changed from Sita) and Radha, who were by relation sister-in-law. Their husbands were invariably depicted as unlikable and recalcitrant. While Ashok is concerned with his search for spiritual salvation and earning funds for his guru's scrotum surgery, Jatin continues to act as Julie's lap-dog lover, an affair he refuses to cease even after marriage. The intimate bond shared between Neeta and Radha concludes in a sex sequence which is discovered by Ashok. Rather than pleading for forgiveness, Radha decides to flee her marriage which had denied her pleasure for the past 13 years. The film passed the censor board restrictions but the right-wing activists took to the streets contesting the screening of the film. While the activists tendered the common knowledge of the romance being "anti-traditional" thus, anti-Indian, Deepa Mehta urged the audience to view the unconventional story as a narrative that the Bollywood lacked.

The film focused on a theoretical framework which the subaltern theorists such as Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj and Dipesh Chakrabarty maintain throughout their postcolonial scholarship. These scholars through their prolific research advance that Indian culture as shaped by the British in their literature has stayed within the society as common notions. Deepa Mehta through this film challenged the idea of associating pristine Indian culture as static and unaccommodating.

The film remains centric to a middle-class family. The background and the setting of the film conceptualises the cultural aspect relevant to the agency of women as if they were never allowed to express their sexual

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<sup>7</sup> *Supra* (n) 1, 630.

<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Rosalind Morris ed., Columbia University Press 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India' [1987] *Cultural Critique: the Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II* University of California Press, 119.

preference and desire without a male member supporting their stance. The agency of Neeta and Radha is portrayed by their decision to elope. The decision to continue to live with each other was perhaps not impulsive arising out of their failed marriages. This was portrayed through the scene where Radha rejects Mundu who is a sexually frustrated man, and there for her taking. At the same time, she chooses to comfort Neeta which eventually culminates into their first kiss and marks the beginning of a passionate relationship.

Chandra Mohanty, a Post-colonial feminist argued that narrow meaning of feminism as construed by Western feminists remains inapplicable to the Third World Women. Further, she suggests that the representations of Third World women devoid of assumptions can occur if the women belonging to the third world or women of colour themselves become active participants in their representations or if the Western scholarship begin to account factors such as race, class and ethnic origin.<sup>10</sup> It can be therefore said a similar implication existed in the movie *Fire*, because it aimed at defying conventional image of an Indian Woman. For instance, certain aspects of the movie such as Radha and Neeta's dance before their mute mother-in-law, and the familial setting of a Hindu Joint Family portrays the distinct nature of Indian culture from the Western conceptions. The portrayal of such images accentuates a truer reflection of Third World Women, who form a distinct identity. Thus, the film analysis of *Fire* encapsulates that the plight of traditions is nothing beyond mere assumptions that characterises the Indian womanhood in a conservative and narrow form. The third world feminism must be perceived as a response to persisting socio-cultural factors which enforce upon the women different sets of restraints to express their sexuality and discontent in a heteronormative relationship. Over the years, Bollywood has represented the Indian woman within the constricted notions of dependency as part of "Indian-ness". The next section expounds upon the same.

## **SUPERIMPOSITION OF "INDIAN-NESS" THROUGH CINEMA**

The maternal representation of India as a nation is outlined by the cultural representation of a Woman who is fragile, submissive and prone to oppression. A woman through such narrow representation is deprived of her individuality as her existence within the society is defined by her relationship with a man i.e., either as her husband or son or father. Within the patriarchal framework of the Indian society, even the judiciary adopts the familial approach to resolve issues relevant to marriages and family. These conceptions are encompassed through movies which instil the variants of judicial pronouncements within the audiences by popularising the phrases such as "*Pati Parmeshwar*" or "*Pati-Vratha aurat*". The pertinent question to analyse is if the representations by Bollywood capture the true image of an Indian Woman. It must be kept in perspective that the image of an Indian Woman in cinema hinges upon the common framework of the society and how it

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<sup>10</sup> Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' in Russo A & Torres L (eds), *Third World Feminism and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1991).



perceives unconventional ideas. Within popular Bollywood, the Indian society is portrayed in a traditional manner which effectuates the role of women as majorly decorative without any real sense of agency.

The Cinematic lens provides an overview of values, principles and cultural ethos of women who play a secondary role as love interest of a hero involved in some kind of enmity with the villain. Heroin is frequently elevated to the status of a "flawless being" that can never be accused of wrongdoing. The desires and feelings of the female protagonist remain blurred in her forgiving attitude. The most common trend dwells upon this merciful depiction in the form of a wife forgiving her husband as the climax, who had committed adultery throughout the movie. This depiction imparts negative image of an ordinary woman who would rarely choose to voluntarily live with a man of such character. The popular cinema in this sense super-imposes an image which remains radically unsound.

Popular cinema as against realistic cinema has incorrectly interpreted the "essence of India" by falsifying the Western themes and ideologies. 'The central leitmotif for their "imagined India" is an unchangeable "Hinduism", that is based on the Sanskrit epics and the "golden-Aryan past".<sup>11</sup> But in reality, very few upper castes ever lived these constructs of "Indian" ethics, of claimed icons and images of Indianness.'<sup>12</sup> These interpretations have affected the manner Indian cultures are portrayed in terms of "Indian Woman" who become the sole bearers of dignity and virtue. Various phases of Bollywood even catered to Indians residing abroad by projecting the superiority of the Indian values as against the Western culture. A glaring example of most renowned film *Dil Wale Dulhaniya Le Jayege*, depicts similar trend through a protagonist as a "submissive Indian girl who would marry a stranger and won't have sex before marriage". On the pretext of love story involving conservative family and a Hindu patriarch as the father, the entire movie functioned on the passing of agency of female protagonist from her traditional father to her *spoilt* Indian lover. Thus, the super-imposition of Indianness projects the rigid power-structures of the Indian society without any escape.

## **IS BOLLYWOOD BECOMING ACCEPTABLE OF REALITY?**

In 2018, the Supreme Court decriminalised Section 377 and paved way for a new beginning in terms of sexual orientation and desires. The movies that released later witnessed an upsurge in terms of their audience along with lowered protests against the screening. For instance, the movie *Ek Ladki ko Dekha toh Aisa Laga* (2019) brought to light the homophobia and inner conflict every queer person goes through while coming to terms with their sexuality. The film answers the relevant issue-oriented concerns and even breaks away from the myth that homosexuality is common to westernised urban elite. However, the movie was criticised for

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<sup>11</sup> Brigitte Schulze, 'The Cinematic 'Discovery of India': Mehboob's Re-Invention of the Nation in Mother India' (2002) 30 Social Scientist, 72.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

depicting a cis-male as an agent of change. Many scholars tied this argument with the persistence of agency once again depicting the need of a “male” to re-define the relations females are “allowed” to feel and share. In its essence the movie could not bring forth the point about intersectionality and sexual minorities. The idea of changing status quo in context of changing the image of “Indian Woman” on screen, should dwell upon the dynamic of identity. In its true sense, intersectional feminism demands to view a woman’s experience as part of LGBTQ+ community as layered discriminated for first being a woman and then belonging to sexual minority. The plight of these women worsens as we move down the privilege ladder and include the caste and class dimension to the same.

In recent times the representations of women in lead role such as in movies like *Razzi*, *Begum Jaan*, *Thapad*, and *Piku* outline the changing trend of Bollywood. Certain films are still seen as controversial given the static mindset or orthodox traditionalists. The film-makers choose to weave a story around real life stories to aid the controversial response. On the other hand, many story writers have resorted to online streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime and Netflix to narrate unconventional stories in much more real and explicit sense. *Lust Stories* for instance, plaited together the stories concerning sexual desires and pleasures of women in erotic manner. Thus, in changing times, the variance in streaming platforms also play a pivotal role.

The ideological politics play an important role because over the years, the Hindu right vigilant groups have gained momentum especially with legislations backing their actions. These vigilant groups undertake the task of maintaining the purity of nation by mandating the creation of goddess like images of Indian woman. In 1994, the screening of the movie *Bandit Queen* was legally contested by the right-wing group for its publicity of sex. Resolving the complicated understanding of culture and providing a new perspective within the same domain of mainstream media has become essential. Thus, to mention that Bollywood is becoming acceptable essentially depends upon the kind of courage the film-makers keep to project the persisting evils of the society against women.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it was established the historically an Indian Woman was seen as a woman of culture and tradition. The colonial discourse added to this perception by associating an image of a pure woman with nationalist struggle. The male nationalists and members of the society were seen as saviours of the fragile nation- India. Cinematic lens contributed to the popular conception of the same and the media remained confined to familial approach when the issues of family was portrayed. Decades later it was seen the image of Indianness was perhaps being super-imposed with protests erupting in parts of country contesting the screening of film that portrayed women with feelings and sexual desires.

Many film makers such as Mina Nair and Deepa Mehta adopted the post-colonial discourse to provide voice to their female protagonist. In much more real sense this approach was not appreciated by the audience but gradually the film culture has evolved to issue-oriented depiction of Indian Woman. The judicial discourse has played its part in moving away from familial approach to an approach promising substantial equality of recognition.

On the other hand, the Bollywood has tried to concern itself with feminist issues by adopting direct criticism of orthodox traditionalists. It was noted that the third world feminism lacks a voice and needs to be recognised in its individual sense rather than being projected as a force contingent to the Western feminism.

While there are many persisting evils that require attention by the Cinematic lens such as widowhood of rural India, the change in ideological politics and intersectional approach can ease the process to some extent. To this effect, films by Mina Nair and Deepa Mehta helped in easing the process and as the audience matures further these sorts of movies will further help to make a more streamlined progress.

