

Men, Men And More Men: Hindi Cinema And Constructed Masculinity

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Abstract

Cinema is the most powerful and universal of all popular cultures as it has the capacity and reaches the widest audience. From Silent to talkie to colour to 70 mm to the viral films, it has caught the imagination and subcultures of various kinds. It has reflected the dominant cultures and also manufactured many of its own, the most powerful being the making of films itself. In the course of cinematic journey there was a need to manufacture a set of cross regional identities and accepted paradigms that are acceptable across the regional boundaries and local aspirations. The success of Hindi films is based on its capacity to transcend borders, confirm stereotypes and reinforce them, manufacture social norms that cause normative behavior to become assertive and assume the shape of greater traditions to manage the social relations. In this context the equations between the sexes are continuously dictated by the prevailing social norms and almost never a mainstream film violates the social norm. It's the off-beat or parallel cinema that creates an alternative narrative of women and her sexuality but in mainstream or commercial cinema more it deviates, more it conforms to social acceptable.

Introduction

The Hindi and other commercial cinemas in India thrive on family as audience and with limited theatre density and low paying capacity, it is the family audience that cinema going in India. It is only with the double or multiple income groups in post 1991 NarsimhaRao liberalization that families with double/multiple incomes came into being that could afford higher entry charges and pay for the expensive beverages and snacks at the theatre and multiplexes made an avatar. Till then it was an all India male star that generally drove the ticket sales. In typical Indian families, head of the family was a man in almost every case and was the main bread winner and was the hero of the family. The father dominated family created a social environment in favour of man as savior, protector, and one who combines the role of lover, husband, brother, father and ideal son with aplomb. The families that saw such a man, with his flaws hidden due to lack of flow of information between channel partners, easily accepted the man as the hero in films too.

Almost same time as the arrival of film making technology to India emerged another man dominated social upheaval that is the freedom movement, soon to be dominated by Gandhi and Congress. A little later the militant nationalism saw violent moves to obtain freedom. Both the strands were dominated by more virile British colonial power based in proverbial 'saatsamundarpaar' that needed the heroic leadership of men who could wrest the freedom. No wonder the first silent movie was also Raja Harishchandra (1913, Dada SahabPhalke) where the male protagonist was self-effacing 'man' who was the sacrifice and

saviour, Gandhi was seen in same mould who sacrificed everything for the nation and winning freedom. Fighting as it was a man's adopted profession and women if at all fought was immediately branded as lakshmibai or hunterwali, something remains true of today too when an young active woman police officer would be called as Hunterwali and even Indira Gandhi was labeled as Chandi. Man fighting is taken as normal. Men have appropriated all open spaces that have potentials of earning and also created notions of carefully constructed roles in family and social behavior through language, visuals and role plays, the most powerful being the films where continuous construction of social roles happen.

Starting in early 20th centuries where all role models were men, films in India were deprived of women actors as acting in films or plays was not considered respectable for women. Film makers had to use male disguised as women for female roles and in the process most stories tried to keep women's roles to minimum and in the course, the male protagonist became dominant and stories were written around them.

In the beginning the film industry drew too heavily from the Parsi theatre traditions which were very loud and musical. Songs were employed to fill in the gaps when the actors were getting dressed or preparing for next scenes and songs also were used to take the story forward. The lack of sound amplification meant that dialogues had to be spoken loud and both songs and loud dialogues suited the male actors more than the female ones.

Once all these factors established the role of men in Hindi film industry, men and manliness became the dominant thread in films. All shades of women were made to be serving the men, all women were either sexually available to men or were portrayed as asexual. Women when in sexual connect with man are shown as sexually attractive and active, but other women like sister, mother and daughter were transformed into stereotypical asexual characters whose main functions were to provide the family to the male protagonist and construct a social context. The man was the protagonist of all films.

The trend was more or less established with the emergence of three stars of early films: Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor. Through the studio system these actors had built a formidable star system where films were written and made for the male protagonists and also the predominantly male viewership. Post-independence India, families were still joint with generations living under one roof and conservative and film viewing was looked down upon. Also the incomes were low and did not allow luxuries like film viewing which remained the male bastion. Later with the expansion of middle class, and rise in incomes of families and lack of any entertainment, films became the only source of outing and entertainment. Here again it was the man, the main breadwinner of the family who made all choices of which film to watch, which theatre to go and naturally he was the one who was seen as natural hero both of the family and on the screen.

The manufacturing of the masculinity was a long but non problematic and linear process as women of the time had little or no influence in public space and lesser participation in decision making jobs. The marginalization of women in public space is a long historical process through manipulation of religion, rituals, prescriptions, taboos, and various texts, religious or literary in nature including those written by the law givers. In the course of

centuries women were pushed to the margin of the society and culture, even though they continued to contribute to the economic life as domestic worker and farm labour among others.

So when films were being made women were already on the margins and could not demand any central role in them. They were happy playing the romantic leads and being support actors to the male lead. The man-hero grew at alarming speed and captured all cinematic imaginations. The emergence of Amitabh Bachhan destroyed all hopes for any space for women. He became a mega star and combined the appeal and reach of all three stars put together and completely banished the romantic superstar Rajesh Khanna. His films were male narratives that left practically no space to women characters as they were relegated to not even decorative props. Films like *Deewar* and *Sholay* had almost eclipsed the women character despite a Basanti and Iconic 'mere paasmaahai' (I have mother) dialogue. Both were there and did not matter to the film narrative. Amitabh films sounded the establishment of what we can call Man Films, a complete man dominated film both in story and treatment where the main plot did not need women, they were there but would not make much difference to the plot or the musical chain of the film. Angry young man was complete in himself to pull the viewer to the theatre. He sang, he danced, he made us laugh, we cried with him. Some what it was also the reason for the decline of story and music in the Hindi film industry which could only be revived much later by the arrival of Shahrukh Khan.

Conclusion

Out of all Khans, it was only Shahrukh who emerged in 1990s and created a unique space of metrosexual an through his films like 'Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman' (Raju has become a Gentleman' and Yes boss that though captured all the cinematic space in the film, did create not so macho man, not so heroic but mean, smart, witty and somewhat less manly, in nutshell, a new man who did not shun his feminine aspects and created a space for not so angry man. The pinnacle of this new man was *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Brave heart will take the bride) that established the mild mannered, metrosexual man with not so manly mannerisms as the new urban, educated, clean shaven, mean and witty enough to survive in ambitious city life. He established or rather revived the spaces for romantic lover boy after Rajesh Khanna and yet he was the new mega star with women still being pretty props. And he still managed to appear to be so accommodating that he appeared in normally heroine dominated Lux soap ads and risked the possibility of creating doubts about his sexual orientations. And yet he won the filmic space for the new urban, employed, non-egoistic, rather mild mannered man in the new age of films. Other two Khans could not break the glass ceiling of manliness and despite his brilliance Aamir Khan remained confined to sidewalks of chest thumping stardom. Salman did not even try.