

Construction Of Masculinity And The Film “Qissa-A Tale Of A Lonely Ghost”

by

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to make the readers understand that Gender is a social construct. Gender identity is constructed and reconstructed in the society. It is not something which is biological but is created through the sociocultural discourse. Media plays a vital role in presenting these sociocultural facts before us. The paper identifies the structures that force a man to behave in a particular way to prove his masculine power with reference to the Punjabi film “Qissa- a Tale of a Lonely Ghost”. It shows how the patriarchal obsession to have a male child provokes Amber Singh to play with the identity of his newly born daughter. It also presents that how the parameters established by the patriarchal society absorbs the existence of a human being. Kanwar is an example of this phenomenon as she succumbs before the hegemonic forces of society. So it becomes more important to understand the issue of Gender Identity which is constructed by the society.

Media plays a crucial role in the construction of Gender Identity. In one way or the other every type of media re-create gender identity. From advertisements to films every character presented in media builds up gender images. So it becomes important to understand the construction of gender identity with reference to media. In media, visual media has an important place especially films. It is one such genre of media that has profound impact on our subconscious in presenting a complete story before our eyes. The lyrics, dances, scenes, music, dialogues, satire, costumes and camera techniques add to the effect which the film has

on our minds. In this research paper an attempt is being made to understand the movie “Qissa- a tale of a lonely Ghost” with reference to Gender Studies. Directed by Anoop Singh, ‘Qissa-a tale of a lonely ghost’ is a unique achievement of Punjabi cinema. Despite being non-punjabi, the cast in the film is very comfortable with their roles. ‘Qissa’ is a Punjabi film made with English subtitles. This film has been seen and appreciated at international level by a large number of non-punjabi and non-indian people. Except India, film investment companies of three other countries (Germany, France, Netherland) invested financially for the production of this film. Besides actors and investors, most of the team members who has worked backstage , are also non-punjabi.

‘Qissa’ is related to the tragedy resulting from the partition of 1947. This film clearly proves it with reference to gender construction that how difficult it is for a human being to start life again when he is separated from his land, its beliefs, customs and feelings. It also highlights the gender and body concepts which in itself is an issue of Gender Studies. Gender Studies focuses on the construction of Gender identity and the presentation of vulnerable identities. Masculinity and femininity are two sexual identities which are its main areas of study. These sexual identities determine the parameters of masculinity and femininity by associating a particular kind of body with a male and a particular other type of body with a female respectively in a sociocultural context. The sociocultural approach created around the body structure suggests the criteria for being a real man and a real woman. While the process of change is present in these parameters over time, it does not go beyond the main parameters of male and female. A person’s gender whether it is male or female is related to his or her sex.

Sex is related to the biological structure of body under which men and women are categorized on the basis of their reproduction organs. So this is crystal clear that the relation of sex to our body is natural whereas Gender is a genre constructed by society which makes the child realize whether he/she is a male or female. When the Famous French feminist thinker Simone De Beauvoir in her book “*The Second Sex*” writes “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”(Beauvoir, p.283) she draws our attention towards the same aspect of sociocultural theory that feminism is not an eternal structure, rather created through sociocultural discourse.

Irfan Khan plays the lead role in the film ‘Qissa’ as Amber Singh, who emigrates from Punjab (Pakistan) to Indian Punjab along with his wife Mehar (Tiska Chopra) and three

daughters. From the very beginning, he has had a strong desire to have a son who will take care of his house and business. Even after three daughters, his wife again delivers a girl child not a boy. Amber Singh treats and presents her as his son(Kanwar) by ignoring the truth that she is a girl. While upbringing her as a boy he addresses her with manly adjectives like 'putt', 'sher', 'bahadur' etc. As a result of this Kanwar starts living and feeling like a boy. His outfit, his gestures, his demeanor, is the embodiment of masculinity. According to Prof. Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke in Washington State University –

“Femininity and masculinity are rooted in the social (one's gender) rather than the biological (one's sex). Societal members decide what being male or female means (e.g., dominant or passive, brave or emotional), and males will generally respond by defining themselves as masculine while females will generally define themselves as feminine. Because these are social definitions, however, it is possible for one to be female and see herself as masculine or male and see himself as feminine.”

Kanwar's inclination towards masculinity, despite having the female body, is a clear example of how society and community institutions play a vital role in the construction of our gender. Home is the main institution of the society. First of all, a human being learns from home how he or she has to deal with society. The dimensions of man and masculinity are suggested to Kanwar by his father Amber Singh from his home only. When Kanwar's sisters, Kulbir and Sohni takes away her kite-spoolhe/she goes to his/her father crying. His/her father Amber Singh's statement at that time is particularly significant in the construction of masculinity –

Oye Kabardaar je kudiyan di taraa royeyan je

Jaa... usdi gutt khich, te lae aa aapni charkhadi wapis.

Jaa...

The above given statement arises as a question mark not only from Kanwar's side but also for the conservative thinking of the society that who weeps, is emotional, is sensitive, is he not a real man ?Or is he the real man who is insensitive, rude, tough and strong ? In reality like gender real masculinity is also a product of society. According to Raewyn Connell bodies in

the world are not same. “To understand masculinity, it is also important to understand multiple bodies” (Connell, p.56). Therefore no single parameter of real masculinity can be determined by understanding the bodies as one. In the film ‘Qissa’, Amber Singh is visually impoverishing Kanwar’s feminine body as well as applying the parameters of hegemonic masculinity on him/her. Connell writes while discussing about hegemonic masculinity-

“Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender Practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and subordination of women.”(Connell, p.77)

As part of the power, hegemonic masculinity creates the illusion of being real masculinity. This same image is presented again and again in the society, and anyone who tries to deviate from this mainstream parameter is ridiculed by being addressed with various abusive adjectives. In every society the parameters of real masculinity can be different. Amber Singh is very close to the conservative parameters of real masculinity prevalent in Punjabi society. He is providing Kanwar with the same parameters in inheritance. He brings wrestler (*bhalwaan ji*) for Kanwar so that he can become strong and his body becomes as hard as iron. He brings rifle for Kanwar and teaches him/her to hunt. He also builds up the same parameters before Kanwar through his daily activities and family relationships. Except our home and its surroundings, people around us especially who are considered as our heroes also create the image of masculinity or femininity. Just like this, the name of the ‘Gama wrestler’ is used by wrestler as a way to direct Kanwar towards imitating the manly-image of Gama wrestler.

Examples of how fictional are the concept of real masculinity, can be deduced from this film. When the menstrual cycle of Kanwar begins, he goes to his father, scared to see the blood -

Kanwar- Papa Ji, Papa Ji, khoon!

Amber Singh- Kinne saal da hogya mera putt

Kanwar- Ji 14

Amber Singh- Hunn bnya tu asli mard. Ghabraa na....

Masculinity is so dominant in Kanwar's gender construction that he/she even loves a gypsy girl. Even when it becomes clear after marriage that she is a girl, even then he/she is reluctant to look at herself in the mirror after wearing Nili's clothes.

Jadd jananaarhe kapde pauna tan lagda jiwe sharer te

Bichoo rengde hon. Kujh samjh ni aunda , main kaun aa? Ki aa ?....

The tragedy is that there are many people in society who are in a state of Gender Dysphoria (in which the body at the time of their birth is incompatible with their gender identity). Instead of giving proper guidance to them regarding who they are? What they are? they are expelled from the community. Same thing happens with Kanwar. When his '*Nanaka Parivar*' realizes this situation they want to kill him. While the film discuss about the construction and effects of Hegemonic Masculinity, it also highlights the concept of multifaceted bodies. We can understand it with reference to Kanwar. More than half of the film bears witness to the fact that gender identities are sociocultural construct. Looking at the end of the film, we may think for some time that by making Kanwar realize that he/she is a woman, this film favors the conservative and already established ideas of gender but this is not so. It bears witness to the fact that bodies are multi-faceted and the same type of masculinity cannot be applied to all bodies. When Kanwar protests before his father that she is a girl not a boy and wants to be liberated, she becomes the representative of all those multifaceted bodies on which the hegemonic parameters of masculinity or femininity are imposed. They now want to be free from all those parameters and live as men and women according to their bodies. Kanwar easily breaks down the parameters of hegemonic masculinity (one who can make sexual relations with his wife, have children and can satisfy a woman) because of having a female body, while the males become slaves to this and are expelled from the mainstream. Due to the female body, Kanwar can never become a man from bodily perspective but can be the embodiment of masculinity which can also be called female masculinity; because masculinity is a set of behavioral codes that occur more or less in both male and female bodies. In Kanwar's upbringing, masculinity is dominant on her and she is playing this gender role very well.

Amber Singh's return as a ghost is a testimony to the fact that it is not easy to get rid of the sacraments we inherit from our parents in childhood. They possess our minds like a ghost.

Kanwar is seen arguing with the sacraments given to him by his father through the ghost of Amber Singh. In the end, in this debate, the weak party's body loses the battle and becomes the holder of hegemonic parameters after being separated from its existence. Influence of the established values is undeniably the reason that every single individual has to bow down before gender hegemony while ignoring the separate existence of body. Kanwar also becomes its victim. Amber Singh's ghost says while absorbing Kanwar in himself -

Hunn tu sachā mard banega.

Finally Kanwar proves himself to be a man of hegemonic masculinity (young, handsome, tough and strong who can take stand for his wife against the villagers) and takes his wife Nili with him. In the end, Nili's suicide highlights the point that in this kind of society and circumstances, not only men but women also cannot survive. Hegemonic parameters of masculinity not only exploit men but also promote the exploitation of women at the hands of men. So it becomes even more important to understand the issue of men and masculinity. In the words of famous Indian sociologist and feminist Kamala Bhasin ;

“If we want peace, If we want meaningful relationships, And if we are really interested in sustainable development. We will have to understand men and masculinity(Bhasin, p.5).”

On the whole it can be said that the film 'Qissa' where directly breaks the established discourse of the body and gender, at the same time it challenges the parameters of Hegemonic masculinity. Kanwar's character is a clear example of how these absurd hegemonic parameters of indigenous identities established in the society absorb the very existence of multifaceted bodies. Being engrossed in these kinds of parameters our society is cursed, in which we could 'neither become men nor women, neither creature nor a ghost'. With such serious issues and outstanding acting, 'Qissa' emerges as a film which gives new direction to the Punjabi Cinema.

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