

Bulges, Beauty, Balls and Business: Representation of Women across Media

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Abstract

Women have been *married* to their physical merits; and *divorced* from their inherent right to exist by their intellectual capacities. They have been used as bait to bring maximum eyeballs to products being advertised or to titillate the lascivious audience of a creepy but beat ball bouncy item number. Women have been simplified and stereotyped as an *objet d'art*, as a mother; fulfiller of desires, as a prospective love interest, a dream or an obedient daughter. She has also been confined to an image of weakness and an added problem arises when seen in cinema portrayals.

To debunk and analyse this trajectory of oversimplified and unjust representation, I seek to present an analysis of female representation in international cinema (Hollywood), Indian Cinema, (Bollywood), especially keeping in mind the culture of 'damsel in distress.' I will also talk about the Advertising industry and how it commodifies a gender for market gains, thus deteriorating the value of women in society.

Introduction: Men have always tried to suppress and subjugate women through coercive means or by generating consensus. Women have been deluded into several theories promulgated by men that can convince them internally to let them give up their right or be subdued. Men have also used women to allure lecherous male customers to foster their businesses. The sexual body appeal is deceptively projected as women empowerment to an extent that western/body revealing dresses have assumed an automatic impression of freedom and progress. Though nobody should dictate terms about clothing for men and women but what remains to be answered is the question – Do women who wear traditional attire are treated equally when it comes to job selection decisions? The answer lies in the fact that the whole society rests/and works (now) on a garbled sense of consumerism, that has deep rooted tentacles from TV to the commonplace vocabulary and the verbal slurs – all of which is unfortunately taken as normal now.

The Advertising Media

The products we come across in the market gain their credibility from endorsed advertising. Often we come across sponsored content in newspapers, cinema, television and digital media which allure us to try a new Fast Moving Consumer Good (FMCG) product or invest in a long-term product like washing machines or cars and real estate.

Advertising works on the A-I-D-A model, which targets consumer conscience using

A- Attraction

I- Interest

D- Desire

A- Action

To grab attention of the customer, advertisers use the Male Gaze Theory¹ and commodify females to leave a lingering image in the consumer's mind.



One highly irrational, yet impactful ad in terms of this attraction principle was made ten years ago by JK Cement. A girl in a swimsuit walking out of the pool is a clear objectification and sensualisation of the gender. On further thought will the viewer realise that cement is used to make a swimming pool, but that will happen after various times this advertisement will be aired or viewed by the consumer. Often, the channel is changed in Indian families when something of sexual nature is aired, which makes us question- how many advertisements are family-friendly to view? Also, does every advertisement need a woman?

Certain other advertisements like that of Axe deodorants or shaving creams have women, which do not fit the purpose of the advertisement and do not do anything to increase the rational appeal of the 10-second work. An extreme case of sexism in advertisements was lashed out against Ranveer Singh who was featured lifting a woman on his shoulder, with the caption Take Your Work Home.



(Campaign to stop objectifying women)

After the #MeToo movement, producers and companies are cautious of their brand image and hence do not indulge in such objectifying advertising. Yet, Imperial Blue ads subtly present the societal bias of men, claiming them to have male qualities under 'Men Will Be Men' tag. This defends the purpose of their surrogate advertising of liquor, showing that some flaws need not be corrected. These ads are lauded for their creativity and humour by all genders alike.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ivUDex8x5I>

One must be aware of the emotional v/s rational appeal of advertised content on the consumers. FMCG products are cheaper hence their advertising is more emotionally intriguing to leave an impact, and allure the customer to try the product after the small investment. Products like kitchen sanitary devices like utensil cleaning cakes and liquids are often endorsed by women. The brand ambassadors targeted for these are most often women, like Shilpa Shetty, Priyanka Chopra and VidyaBalan for Exo utensil washing cakes. Who can forget the Nirma ad which has women endorsing the washing powder?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvgR29F5Zos>

The present situation is male actors like Amitabh Bacchan, Salman Khan, Hritik Roshan, Akshay Kumar, AparshaktiKhurana etc. endorsing these products, which shows that the stigma around women controlling the kitchen and home sphere is slowly fading.



(The old ad. didactically and unabashedly refers to the “real job”)



An old ad. brazenly commodify ing women.

The current situation has to be acknowledged that women are given meaningful scripts and roles in advertising to depict the positively - changing social structure with regards to the half population.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KP0aDTVtFI>

Jaago Re! ads from the Tata Tea franchise also throw light on issues like voting, tripling and increasing crimes against women.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anX2T72HpSg>

Bollywood and The Distressed Damsels

The Indian film industry had minimal to almost zero female representation until after Independence, and the roles were stereotyped as the consort of the male lead, adding element and colour of romance to the silver screen sagas. "The audience expects certain stereotypes and over the years it has become an easy option for filmmakers to establish characters. In a typical film, the filmmaker relies on outfit, mannerism and dialogues to characterise and distinguish a good mother from a bad mother," said trade analyst KomalNahta, who stresses on the fact that it is the most convenient way for a filmmaker to associate something with a character.

Although Indian films are trying to break stereotypes and opting for innovative characters, the process has largely been slow. Despite a spate of several prominent female-oriented films offering meaty roles to heroines and several promising women filmmakers creating offbeat cinema in recent times, our films have rarely got rid of stereotypes.

"The line between the heroine and the vamp has blurred," said ad filmmaker PrahladKakkar. "This is a perfect example of diminishing stereotypes. It's a welcome sign that the films are trying to outgrow the set pattern of demarcating the characters. Films such as Mary Kom, Kahaani or Haider - where Tabu is depicted as an atypical filmy mother - have been appreciated by the audience. This is a clear proof that the audience wants our films to break away from stereotypes," said Kakkar.

In the 70s, every time a woman on screen pleaded "bhagwaankeliyemujhechhod do" to a menacing villain with ignoble intent, the front stalls would mostly burst into whistles. The stock situation had become perverted titillation of sorts. The phenomenon summed up the mindset of a segment of the audience who loved to see women subjugated on screen. Elsewhere, MeenaKumari's portrayal of sorrowful and melodramatic characters in several films earned her the sobriquet of Tragedy Queen.

Another stereotypical connotation and depiction was that of the hero's sister, who was written as the perfect definition of the distressed damsel or 'ablanaari'. The sister's rape enraged the heroes such as Amitabh Bachchan in Aakhree Rasta, Raj Babbar in Aaj Ki Awaz and Sunil Shetty in Aaghaz, unleashing violent vendetta. These women could not stand up for themselves, and eventually turned meek and sobbing on screen.

One movie that shows a strong woman brought down by rape was Bandit Queen, which questioned the power of women because men had harassing ways of getting back at them. Another stereotypical representation of women is through the fantasised ideal women - the traditional Indian girl. In the films of the '60s and the '70s, she was often typified as a girl who would wake up early, sing bhajans, worship her husband and cook for the family. If she

ever worked (which was rare; necessary only if she came from a very poor family), she would walk to office. The era of '80s saw a spate of family films that had almost every heroine from Hema Malini and Rekha to Moushumi Chatterjee and Vidya Sinha try out the formula, either as a daughter in law, sister-in-law or single mother.

The good girl is the one whom the hero ultimately picks to take home. A foreign-educated Salman Khan in *Maine Pyar Kiya* or *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* prefers the coy conservatively dressed girl over the one with a modern mindset who is invariably projected as a vamp or a tempered girl. This is also visible in *Dil Bole Harippa*, where Sherlyn Chopra and Rakhi Sawant are shown wearing skimpy clothes only to show the traditional beauty of Rani Mukherjee.

In *Vivah*, Shahid Kapoor repeats the template while wooing the very traditional Amrita Rao. In *Cocktail*, Saif Ali Khan picks the super-sanskari Meera, played by Diana Pentz, after gallivanting with Deepika Padukone's free-spirited Veronica all along. Worse, when Veronica decides to try wooing the hero one final time in the end, she turns demure in salwar-kameez, giving up her micromini image in an instant as an indication that she can go any heights to adapt to the whims of her love interest while he stayed as he was.

The Amitabh Bachchan film *Kaalia* presented Bollywood's obsession for sanskari women in a lighter vein when Parveen Babi, playing a pickpocket, tries impressing the hero's conservative bhabhi with a saree-clad makeover. In *Main Hoon Na*, Sushmita Sen is a teacher who dresses in sarees and appears to be the perfect sultry partner, strictness and attitude with an attractive persona, for the lead Major Ram essayed by Shah Rukh Khan. Sen transforms Amrita Rao into a suit-wearing, straight-haired beautiful girl from the tomboyish persona that failed to woo her love interest, the younger brother of SRK essayed by Zayed Khan. She is the natural choice against Rakhi Sawant, who is shown applying make-up and wearing miniskirts, called 'micro-mini' as a jibe by Rao herself.

Some typical names like Helene, Zeenat Aman, Mallika Sherawat to Sherlyn Chopra and Zareen Khan became staple names for item songs in movies, with revealing clothes and a personality that is always connoted with sexuality. Though item songs have become a trend for A-list actors as well, some women in Bollywood will only be typecast for a certain nature of roles and this is a normative reality for the commercial Indian cinema. These actresses will not be easily accepted as household names for their choice of roles and the nature of roles offered to them, for instance Sunny Leone and Urvashi Rautela, or Evelyn Sharma like in *Yaariyan* and *Ye Jawani Hai Deewani*.

Shameful Gender Discrimination in Hollywood

A study which also included insights and researches from the United Nations claims that filmmakers worldwide are perpetuating gender discrimination by failing to find strong roles for women on the big screen. The details of this report were revealed by actor and activist Geena Davis.

The study showed how fewer than one third of all speaking roles went to women, who were also largely absent from positions of power. Only 22.5% of the overall fictional big screen workforce was shown to be made up of female employees, and fewer than 15% were

portrayed as being employed as business executives, political figures, or in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and/or mathematics.

The study was conducted by Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California. It unravelled “deep-seated discrimination and pervasive stereotyping of women and girls by the international film industry.”. The study was supported by UN Women along with The Rockefeller Foundation and Davis’s Institute on Gender in Media.

Davis said: “The fact is: women are seriously under-represented across nearly all sectors of society around the globe, not just on-screen, but for the most part we’re simply not aware of the extent. In the time it takes to make a movie, we can change what the future looks like.

The actor added: “There are woefully few women CEOs in the world, but there can be lots of them in films. How do we encourage a lot more girls to pursue science, technology and engineering careers? By casting droves of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), politics, law and other professions today in movies.”

The UN report does not mark the first occasion upon which the film industry has been accused of failing on gender terms. A 2013 report commissioned by the Sundance film festival suggested that female directors were struggling in mainstream Hollywood despite appearing in greater numbers in the field of independent film. In July this year, another study revealed that 75% of employees on blockbuster film sets are male.

Hollywood films rely on stereotypical depictions of A-list heroines, needing them to look and behave a certain way. The consort of powerful leads or the muses of villains, these women had no significant or pivotal roles in the movies. The James Bond franchise is a testimony to this depiction, with Bond girls being subsidiaries to the lead of these films. Added to this, the persona of a Femme Fatale is visible in these movies

In July 2017, USC’s Annenberg Inclusion Initiative released its annual report analysing representation in top-grossing movies. Looking at 900 films from 2007 to 2016, researchers found that only 12% had gender-balanced casts.

However, it’s not just the number of female characters that’s the problem. Tired, regressive stereotypes continue to plague many of the female characters in TV and film.

Too often, movies about difficult men and male antiheroes feature wives whose only character trait is exasperation — to illustrate just how difficult that man is. In the recent L.A. heist film “Den of Thieves,” we know Gerard Butler’s tough detective character Big Nick is a madman because he eats a doughnut from a blood-spattered box in the middle of a crime scene, but that fact is underscored when his frustrated wife, Debbie (Dawn Olivieri) packs up and leaves, along with their daughters. Later, he barges in on her dinner date, and then cries next to a playground to clarify that yes, he does feel emotions. Debbie and their daughters aren’t actual characters with inner lives; they serve only to tell us more about Big Nick. Might as well just write them out, or at least offer them more characterization, because otherwise, they’re just pawns in this story.

On the flip side, many stories about male heroes use long-suffering wives to offer emotional stakes to a crisis. These women seem to always be tethered to a phone as they try to contact their husbands, whether at war or on a crashing plane, and let the phone slip from their hands

only while watching a dramatic news report on TV. The best example of this would be Laura Linney's Lorrie Sullenberger, wife of Charles "Sully" Sullenberger (Tom Hanks), in Clint Eastwood's "Sully."

2. Sexual conquest to help him get his mojo back

This character was popularized in pop culture with a gender swap of the stereotype in 1998's "How Stella Got Her Groove Back," with Angela Bassett and Taye Diggs. But more often than not, the female versions of these characters are flippantly used and discarded without any sort of development or nuance, like Katie Aselton's Sarah in "Father Figures." Ed Helms plays Peter, an uptight divorced doctor searching for his birth father with his twin brother, Kyle (Owen Wilson), but really, it's a journey to find himself. And for Kyle, that means getting Peter laid, and any woman they encounter is an option. Peter finally succeeds, by swooping in on a sad Sarah, drinking alone at a hotel bar. The encounter puts a renewed spring in his step — bully for him.

Another version of this would be the manic pixie dream girl, as coined by film and music critic Nathan Rabin in 2007 to describe quirky, oddball female characters who help a man feel excited about life again. Natalie Portman's Shins-listening weirdo Sam (hobbies include: primal screaming on top of heavy machinery) in "Garden State" is the best example of this, but notable manic pixie dream girls include Zooey Deschanel's Summer in "500 Days of (Summer)" and Kirsten Dunst's Claire in "Elizabethtown."

3. The cold careerist

Katherine Heigl has made a career out of playing cold, careerist women who are eventually softened by love and marriage. Exploring those characters fully can be interesting, especially in the romcom "27 Dresses." But those characters can drift into stereotype all too easily when the focus isn't on them. See Bryce Dallas Howard's notoriously derided Claire in "Jurassic World" — a woman so uptight, she wears high heels to work on a dinosaur island. Another indicator of her coldness? That perfectly sharp bob haircut. You see, as she becomes more relaxed, so does her hair. Get it?

4. The rape victim who inspires action

It's a trope almost as old as cinema itself. From D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" to Nate Parker's "The Birth of a Nation," female victims of violence (usually sexual) have inspired men to vengeance. In Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," the sexual violation of a white woman by a black man inspires the Ku Klux Klan to take to its hoods and torches. In Parker's "The Birth of a Nation," he employs not one, not two but at least three rapes to justify Nat Turner's bloody massacre. The rapes are not a part of the Turner legend, but within a two-hour running time, that kind of gendered violence creates a narrative shortcut to justify his killing spree, shocking and horrifying the audience to get them on Turner's side.

. In terms of character motivation, sexual violence against women is more often than not lazy screenwriting.

5. The plucky girl child who helps a man find his purpose

This can go one of two ways — super dark, like Jodie Foster's teen prostitute Iris, who helps inspire Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) shoot-em-up in "Taxi Driver." It could also be more heart-warming, like in the sweet child prodigy film "Gifted," where McKenna Grace's math

whiz Mary helps her guardian uncle Frank (Chris Evans) grow up. Either way you slice it, these plucky, precocious girls (always girls, rarely boys) help men find their destiny.

There are certainly valid ways to write these types of stories and characters. The problem is that most often, these characters aren't developed enough to stand on their own — they serve only to aid a male character's characterization or arc. It's reflective of a predominantly male worldview. We can only hope that more inclusion of diverse voices will hasten the retirement of these stale and empty stereotypes.

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