

# Trivialization or Liberation: Interrogating Humour in Biopic Discourses

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*The linguistic analysis of a text is a vital step in elucidating the validity of claims to gender difference in language.*

## —Feminist Stylistics

*Language strikes at a deep level of our psyche. Certain words are chosen or rejected by our psyche depending upon the language in which they are uttered. Words like rape or breast do not sound provocative when expressed in English, a foreign language for India, as they create psychological detachment from the construct these words connote. But the same expression in Hindi can put vulgarity on a pedestal. When seen from a gender perspective, language in Hindi cinema has been exploiting feminine sexuality provoking sensation and amusement. There exists a plethora of discussions on sex and female anatomy projecting the male mental world in which the female body is an object of pleasure and can easily be exploited. Assisting the direct transference of unconscious psychic material, language incarnates the patriarchal ideology.*

*Keeping in cue with the aforesaid, the research shall aim at examining how obscenity in Hindi cinema in the recent decade has been promoted to a new level of vulgarity where in it goes beyond all inhibitions, shedding pretentious shields in its use of language. Accorded with the camera tactics and tawdry music at the backdrop, the study shall further analyze two biopic texts, *Great Grand Masti* (2016) and *Babumoshai Bandoobaaaz* (2017) and the co-relation of narrative structure and gender where it is the linguistic form itself that appears to be gendered.*

**Keywords:** Language, sexuality, obscenity, linguistic, gendered.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of gender identity as immutable has prompted a renewed focus on the rethinking of issues pertaining to the representation of women in Hindi cinema. Since its inception, Hindi cinema has portrayed women as marginalized identities defined within the domain of patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks, struggling to break free from the shackles of ideological stereotypes which denied their self-hood and identity. Being visualized as ideal mothers, submissive housewives or dependent daughters or as immoral prostitutes, cabaret dancers and strippers; cinema in its early phase has

emphasized upon women as having slightest importance. Within the domain of Hindi cinema, the notions of male gaze and spectatorship have ever since assisted in passive display of female bodies, fetishism, voyeurism, and the successful subordination of the female to the male gaze. Films, ostensibly, celebrate women's eroticism while reducing her to a passive sex-object.

The making and presentation of Hindi cinema and the extent to which filmmakers have been able to stir up the man-woman relationship depends upon the cultural ethos of the Indian society and its myriad manifestations. Even though Hindi cinema has been churning out stereotype image of gender relations and showing mother-in-law or a sister-in-law as a bully, who are all inadvertently perpetrating patriarchy in a way, yet it has always emphasized on depicting the evil in darker light. Interestingly, the ethos and tradition of Indian society has always been evolving and so is its portrayal in films. Although, Hindi cinema is a rich repertoire of traditional values and keeps reinventing the socio-cultural ambiance of patriarchy in its films but there does exist a transition in the recent decades wherein female performers have been breaking as well as perpetuating the stereotypes of masculine and feminine, making themselves an emblem of both the set of emotions. The recent integrated approaches mark a shift from the focus on equality towards the focus on difference. The focus now is no longer on the "Althusserian Marxism" or the "Lacanian psychoanalysis" origin of feminist film theory but on female individualism, choice and empowerment. Imelda Whelehan in *Modern feminist thought* (1995) vehemently negates the focus on equality when she states that "to be able to include difference in feminism, it is better to work with a removal of oppression instead of trying to create equality" (138).

Nevertheless, contemporary movies reflect the inherent multiplicity within the seemingly homogeneous category of Indian femininity being projected ever since. When seen from a gender perspective, language in Hindi cinema has been exploiting feminine sexuality provoking sensation and

amusement. There exists a plethora of discussions on sex and female anatomy projecting the male mental world in which the female body is an object of pleasure and can easily be exploited. Assisting the direct transference of unconscious psychic material, language incarnates the patriarchal ideology.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Powerful and persistent commodity of the postmodern civilization, films operate as a medium constructing and perpetuating popular culture. Being an instrument of supremacy as well as visionary art, they have the potential to both, reaffirm or challenge the status quo. Indian film Industry, being the largest film industry has been used as a tool to promote Indian culture and tradition. This resonates as to why is it significant to analyse films i.e., films as a rhetorical text becomes an ideal avenue for the traditional female representations and their implication on the spectators.

Keeping in cue with the aforesaid, the research aims at examining how obscenity in Hindi cinema in the recent decade has been promoted to a new level of vulgarity where in it goes beyond all inhibitions, shedding pretentious shields in its use of language. Accorded with the camera tactics and tawdry music at the backdrop, the study analyzes two biopic texts, *Great Grand Masti* (2016) and *Babumoshai Bandoobaaaz* (2017) and the co-relation of narrative structure and gender where it is the linguistic form itself that appears to be gendered.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The twentieth century post-feminist ideology addresses the relationship between women and power. The filmmakers in the recent decades display a transition in the image of women who break free from their stifling environment, rising above what is traditionally being expected of an Indian woman, suggesting her power for self-definition and self-assertion. Countering the earlier notions of second wave feminism, post-feminism rejoices female autonomy, individuality and choice in regards to “femininity/ sexuality” (77). Relying on the self-will, desire and individual choice, Genz argues that power has nothing to do with being feminine as its her choice if she wants to celebrate the pleasures of “pink-packaged femininity” (Baumgardner 137). Decorating ourselves is not for others and that equality can be achieved without compromising the faux conception pertaining to feminine adornment.

Nevertheless, there exists a difference between being liberated and being exploited. Femininity does no harm to females but being heterosexually active subjects does not necessarily provide freedom, equality or emancipation. Condemning the notion of raunch femininity, Ariel Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* argues that sexual freedom endorses false empowerment. Disparaging such celluloid figures as Female

chauvinist pigs, she suggests that they become successful in the cinematic world by selling their sexuality as she remarks,

The glossy, overheated thumping of sexuality in our culture is less about connection than consumption. Hotness has become our cultural currency... Hotness is not the same thing as beauty, which has been valued throughout history. (Levy 31)

The intrusion of raunch culture into film industry commodifies female body and once again exhibits them as objects available for male pleasure. Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” and women as passive objects can be seen in raunch femininity which disguises itself under the name of female assertiveness and power. Mulvey key concern regarding misbalancing of power in cinema has been correlated with psychoanalysis wherein she suggests the reason why women are excluded from the realm of law, language and social order. Freud’s scopophilia, the pleasure in looking, assists in understanding Mulvey’s argument that cinema deploys unconscious mechanisms in which image of woman acts as a signifier of sexual difference, resulting in man’s image as the maker of meaning. Revolving around the spectator and the camera’s eye, cinema offers pleasures and libidinal gratification from the object of the gaze. Male spectator, as supported by the mechanism of visual gratification considers woman as an object, suggesting ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’.

In the similar vein, Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* also dismantles this very notion of individual free choice which is attained by heralding sexually provocative appearance. She argues that such attempts of liberating females “permits the subtle renewal of gender injustices, while vengeful patriarchal norms are also re-instated” (55). Through her use of “double entanglement” i.e., female empowerment amalgamated with females being ridiculed – a “well-regulated liberty” (McRobbie 22); post-feminist ideology, she argues, becomes an exchange process where women gain symbolic equality and that individualism operates as a social process constraining women’s advancement. Likewise, Imelda Whelehan in *Feminist Bestseller* also distinguishes between women’s sexual liberation and empowerment. Articulating her disbelief over the sexual revolution of 1960s, she avers that it proved to be hollow for celluloid females and refers to sexual revolution as:

a chimera where chimera where women were being sold the idea of sex as liberation but often it cast them in just as strong a thrall to men, with new pressures to perform sexually at every occasion. (109)

These critics analyze the notion of personal choice and reject post-feminist conception of sexual freedom on the grounds that it leads to sexual objectification instead of providing females empowerment and freedom. Moreover, the interrogation here is beyond the textual analysis employed by the feminist film study. Observing the contextual factors, the cultural-economic logic behind such representations can be a

notable perspective. The objective of such portrayals is to make such films stand out at the box office through the merging of multiple processes and practices including stars, franchising, merchandising, technologies, etc. swayed by such technologies, spectators not only watch these movies to examine the cinematic effects but through the consumption of technology, they satisfy their fascination. Watching the illusionary sexual freedom and revolution serves as multiple consumptive processes wherein females are used as composite commodities, as instruments of technology and spectacle for audiences to provide them pleasure. However, to become empowered, women are impaired by the cultural obsessions like the presumed image, signs, spectacles and the tendency of making her object. These traditional apparatuses suppress their individuality in spite of partly losing power in the face of transition towards subjectification. The hypersexual heroine loses her subjectivity and becomes pure object of look, not only because she is sexualized but because of the overwhelming objectifying look which applies to everything. Thus, she becomes a perfect machine to produce and reproduce the simulacra of feminist myth. And how exactly feminism operates fades behind post-feminism which circulates the notion that all feminist agendas have been achieved and that women should celebrate such position of being subject as it renders them with power. The root of such oxymoronic representations lies in the cultural-economic logic associated with such representations. If for post-feminists they are active agents then this agency is a subject to the objectifying tradition and to the flamboyant spectacle. Being a simulation of powerful women who embraces heterosexual desire, what post-feminism asserts actually encourages and strengthens objectifying consumer culture that relegates women as sexual objects. As long as celluloid females indulge in this culture, the superficiality of being empowered will be considered as rightful route to worsen the situation. For what feminists failed to recognize was not the consideration of women as homogeneous entity but the fact that even men and almost everything; the plot, action, the technology are equally pleasurable for spectators to look at. Categorized under erotic objectification, women remain under the chimera of a hyperreal world which constructs a simulacrum, a utopian world where women enjoy equality, gorgeous look as projected by post-feminism in media world.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, female sexual objectification has become a subject of feminist debate. The sexual revolution of 1960s provided freedom of sexual expression to celluloid females by questioning the power relations that existed between both the sexes. It also freed individuals from the moral and legal confines. Criticizing this sexual liberation, Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* argues how “women have been persuaded to shed their armour under the guise of sexual revolution” (127). She further averred that the sexual revolution brought no improvements for women but proved to have great value for men: by convincing women that the usual female games and demands were despicable, unfair...

and self-destructive, a new reservoir of available females was created to expand the tight supply of goods available for traditional sexual exploitation. (127-8)

In today’s era, this revolution has become a thing of the past but its relaxation over sexual inhibitions still continues along with its consequences. Sexual gratification as one of the prominent paradigm of the Raunch culture, offers an exceptional prospect to biopic females who desire to prove their mettle. This culture of exhibitionism disguises the consumption of sexuality within the narratives of individuality, choice and empowerment.

#### 4. INTERROGATING HUMOUR IN GREAT GRAND MASTI AND BABUMOSHAI BANDOOKBAAZ

From the perspective of Indian cinema, women as the central protagonist began to reflect evidence of change in 1970s. As Viridi in *Cinematic Imagination* avers, “Strongly influenced by the Victorian principles, sex as an aspect heterosexual love was broached gingerly in the popular cinema of the 1970s” (147). Cinema’s curious prudery on matters of sexual intimacy marked its appearance with *Aradhana*, “the first to explicitly associate romantic love with sexual desire” (148). These changes which were initially imperceptible and trivial, have gradually become perceptible in the recent decades. Hypersexuality has become a widespread notion in Hindi cinema itself and females relish their reflection as eye candies for their male counterparts. Be it *The Dirty Picture*, *Grand Masti*, *Hate Story 3*, *Kya Cool hain hum*, *Mastizaade*, *Great Grand Masti* etc all females are essentially hero’s props here and are bunged in purely for eroticism.

The intrusion of sex industry into the mainstream culture and the resultant naturalization of erotic, vulgar images of the female body conceptualize a double movement in which the agents are enabled and disabled in terms of power relations. Suggesting a replacement of the “monstrous ugliness” (2) of feminism, post feminism values women’s choices of participation in sexualized culture. Undoubtedly, such attempts of liberating females “permits the subtle renewal of gender injustices, while vengeful patriarchal norms are also reinstated” (55). The main focus therefore relies on “shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse on choice and anatomy and an emphasis on empowerment” (Gill). Such terminology of choice and liberation reflect freedom being revitalized leading to “faux” empowerment (1). Taking cue from Levy and McRobbie, the main argument is that individualism operates as a social process which constrains women’s advancement.

Raunch culture, a strand of postfeminism is examined in the recent Bollywood movies, *Great Grand Masti* and *Babumoshai Bandookbaaz*. Both these movies critique the perception that the investment in raunch feminine sexuality empowers female characters, but if observed profoundly, they celebrate the commodification of women’s body. Frequently revolving around sex and consumption, it celebrates female

agency through its discernment that women in such movies are provided the capacity to “have it all” (Genz 98). Drawing upon Levy’s notion of “Female Chauvinist Pigs” and McRobbie’s notion of “double entanglement”, the focus is that this apparent empowerment is hollow for celluloid females; their actions incite cultural anxieties about the ways women are to be represented and simply reinforce the patriarchal norms that envisage women as objects. Focusing upon the hypersexualization of female body, these movies reflect the post feminist ideals of sexual investment in raunch culture via dress and behavior yet paradoxically depicts the exploitation of body and sexuality as commodities for women to get ahead in the androcentric world. Stradivarius of body tends to deem these women on the basis of their “hotness” (Levy 92) and this makes their identity as a “loophole woman”, an exception in a male-dominated field whose presence supposedly proves its penetrability” (94). Enticing males due to their desire for her, loophole woman employs her own body to gain power which turns out to be disadvantageous for her;

If you are an exception that proves the rule, and the rule is that women are inferior, you haven’t made any progress. (Levy 117)

Being positioned as sexual objects women in both *Great Grand Masti* and *Babumoshai Bandoobaaaz* are mocked at in sexual context resulting in the establishment of patriarchal authority in sexual conduct. Their raunchy behavior which portrays female sexual liberation can be very well related to the postfeminist idiom “double entanglement” which reflects giving with one hand and taking away from the other for females i.e., female empowerment amalgamated with females being ridiculed – a “well-regulated liberty” (McRobbie 22).

The female characters in these two movies assume a semblance of self-empowerment via investments in commodified bodily ideals but do so without realizing the alleged benefits of sexual liberation that raunch culture supposedly offers them. Propagating this view of postfeminist culture that relegates women as victims of patriarchal order under the guise of empowerment, McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009) argues that

Women are currently being disempowered through the very discourse of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism. (49)

Undoubtedly there exists a shift in the sexualized representation of women in cinema from passive objects to active subjects. Earlier, it was in connection to male gaze which has now been eradicated all together. Instead of being a sexual object of male gaze, biopic females chose to project themselves in a way that male counterpart plays with her body, but this detachment takes away his control and mastery over her and he is being reduced to a programmed ‘doer’ whose each and every move is anticipated by her who is more active, confident and auto erotic sexuality. Women now

increasingly produce a narcissist neo-liberal self-policing gaze where they don’t seek men’s approval but do rely upon them to take pleasure through sexual advances. Ultimately benefit males by re-producing the male gaze and becoming a market product selling their sexuality.

When seen from a gender perspective, language in these movies has been exploiting feminine sexuality provoking sensation and amusement. There exists a plethora of discussions on sex and female anatomy projecting the male mental world in which the female body is an object of pleasure and can easily be exploited. Assisting the direct transference of unconscious psychic material, language incarnates the patriarchal ideology. As has been asserted by Lenin in where he rightly remark how language as a manifestation of ideology positions us within patriarchy and we as individuals become subjects in the hands of patriarchy;

all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects. (117)

The liberal use of freaky, weird dialogues and scenes to entertain the audience focuses on availability of assailable women for assault. The difference is that in *Babumoshai Bandoobaaaz* it is with a certain level of indirectness while in *Great Grand Masti* it is crudely direct. Every dialogue in the movie is conjoined with double entendre thereby, making fun of feminine sexuality.

Relying upon Hindi metaphors and English words, these movies relegate women as victims of the sex starved men through its cringe-worthy dialogues. Exploiting the female sexuality, both the movies go beyond all inhibitions, shedding pretentious shields in its use of language. Evidently, the obscenity in Hindi cinema has been promoted to a new level of vulgarity. Accorded with the camera tactics and tawdry music at the backdrop, it has honored the hero and not the villain to liberally use words like “balaatkaar”, “sluts”, “sthanning” and many more for promoting their movie at the box office. It has also privileged the central protagonist, Silk, with prestigious national awards for her indecent acts and outspoken vulgarity.

Moreover, language strikes at a deep level of our psyche. Certain words are chosen or rejected by our psyche depending upon the language in which they are uttered. Words like rape or breast do not sound provocative when expressed in English, a foreign language for India, as they create psychological detachment from the construct these words connote. But the same expression in Hindi can put vulgarity on a pedestal. Crude jokes on sex and female anatomy could not have evoked loud laughter or hooting if they were cracked in English. So, the choice of words and language reveals the self-objectification in *Great Grand Masti* and *Babumoshai Bandoobaaaz* it creates fun of female body in order to encourage a barrel of monkeys.

## 5. MAJOR FINDINGS

By such a delusionary depiction of her as self reflexive and determined, raunch feminine sexuality presents her picture as silent, mute object being defined by the masculine notions of sexuality. She considers sexuality to be constructing her identity but in reality it serves as a route which offers power to patriarchy by giving herself completely to him through sexual encounters. Young actresses enacting such demeaning roles blur the fine line that exists between emphasized femininity and raunch femininity. Being raunchy undoubtedly offers the illusion of control. In reality women are still ensnared in a framework of social expectations which recognizes women as sexually desired objects. Trying to capture the power, Cinema on one hand eulogizes men for sexual voracity and on the other it disgraces women if they are sexually desirous. Both *Great Grand Masti* and *Babumoshai Bandoobaaaz* exhibit that such representations do not attempt to change the harmful stereotypes instead repute masculinity to be of paramount importance. They rather embody femininity in a more potent manner where weepies have been going dirty and machos have been doing masti with every new arrival of movie sparking off the endless discourse on illusionary denunciation of power.

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