

Masculinity and the Other Gaze: A Study on Modern Bollywood Films

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Abstract—Indian cinema, mostly the bollywood, has remained the epicenter of entertainment for the masses at large of this country for about a century now. The cinematic bond that thrives within the Indian community has escalated remarkably over the decades and caters not only the Indians but also a huge chunk of global audience. Cinema often tends to be a reflection of the society and being the country producing highest number of films annually, there arises a serious need to analyze the various dimensions of cinematic viewings on mass audience. One such important dimension that steps out distinctly is the portrayal of characters in silver screens. The present study takes this dimension and elaborates on the depiction of male characters, masculinity factor and also on the female ‘other’ gaze that have become so vivid in today’s films churning out of the Bombay Film Industry. The study traces the ways in which modern male characters are portrayed with an increasing realist perspective on one hand and a pseudo-real depiction on the other. Male characters have significantly shifted from their shell-closed way of representation and the masculinity factor has been reloaded in a complete new definition. The study takes a significant account of the overt female gaze that are used so incessantly in most of the modern bollywood films that there identifies a need to understand the ‘gaze ratio’ that a film showcases in comparison to its already thriving concept of male gaze. The study helps to understand how the society is being influenced by depiction of such renewed male characters and its corresponding influence back on the scripts making the whole cinematic experience even bolder and curbing a complete new generation out of the masses harboring variant ideologies.

Keywords: *bollywood, male characters, masculinity, male gaze, female gaze*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Lumiere Brothers’ invention at the end of nineteenth century transported the viewing audience to a different and illusionary reality. In fact, cinema which began flourishing from the day it debuted was a great technological novelty though most scholars consider the content or function to be nothing new- a concoction of

stories, drama, music, dance, and action- all for the sake of entertainment for popular masses [1]. But apart from mere entertainment, the silent era featured more of 'fragments of actuality' based clippings, a strand soon to be considered documentaries in the coming years. The advent of sound led the whole cinematic experience attain new height with people literally amazed at the new form of entertainment, a window for the most of the working class audience to spend a moment of leisure. By the second half of the twentieth century, the whole film industry was leaping unparallel scales of success both economically as well as towards the process of understanding the power of that mass medium we call the moving pictures. The film movements across the world including Russian Montage, German Expressionism, French New Wave, Italian Neo-Realist and those from Iran, Japan and Korea further revolutionized the whole concept and purpose of cinema.

2. INDIAN CINEMA

The year 1969 witnessed a sharp aberration from the routine and hitherto followed path which most of the storytellers have used since the days of *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. Unprecedented representations of reality swap the silver screen and with that there mushroomed numerous directors who became the flag bearers of what came to be identified as the Indian Parallel Movement in cinema. At one hand where the stereotypical story telling with flamboyant sequences paced for box office collections, serious scripts taken from everyday happenings began to cater their viewers a slice of one's life. The portrayed characters seemed to be very common and most importantly their activities known.

Unlike the initial days, character depiction in bollywood films was restricted with certain chosen roles to be showcased on the screen thereby restricting the wider dimensions of usage of cinema. Mythological characters ruled for more than two decades with patriotic films turning next important genre on the director's storyboard. The golden age of bollywood reiterated the romantic themes and melodramatic viewings with characters slowly imbibing realist approach on societal issues but yet more flamboyant with music and dance dominating the true spirit. As the society evolved, especially post parallel film movement, film makers turned more realistic in their approach and their characters began to incorporate instincts that ruled society from time to time – a cinematic step that acts to mirror the society.

2.1 Male Characters

Characterization has remained the soul of any film and most importantly helps build the image of the actor justifying the role. From the dawn of moving pictures,

film makers have intensified the importance of a male actor in a film by their careful representation. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to comment on the very starting of bollywood characters has been totally male. It is male characters that performed each and every character (including any female roles) in a movie at the initial days and mention may be made of *Raja Harishchandra*. With only few genres arising out of the bollywood industry, the role of male characters too remained more or less same for a considerable period of time with actors incessantly depicting mythological figures, patriotic soldiers, farmers, landlords, politicians, cops, anti-societal characters and working class representatives. Romantic outlook soon juxtaposed with above roles with rhythmic dancing and choreographed action stunts. Male characters, mostly the lead ones- 'hero'-emerged as the most important aspect in a film and its success depended on the way that character had been portrayed. The female leads till then were just a supporting need for the male counterpart to further advertise their moods and behavior with respect to the story. The scene still holds good even for modern bollywood films but there surely has been an umpteen other characters that have been given due place in the already existing gamut of pseudo-real characters.

2.2 Masculinity – what it had been

Masculinity, or rather to be masculine, is considered to be the USP for any male. The concept of masculinity highly relates itself with that of power and strength. The society has time and again pictured masculinity with patriarchal means of life and equally being represented by our films right from the beginning. R.W.Connell [2] by his concept of hegemonic masculinity shows the increasing trend of male dominancy stand in society and the submissive role of women. Masculinity has been represented with brutal, tough, violent and even by higher economic status. Fighting scores of goons by a lone angry hero in order to save the vulnerable heroine, his lady love, formed the cult line for most of the bollywood films during the 1970's and 1980's. Masculinity until then had been attaining victory in any issue by the hero and mostly it had been physical with few instances of rough attitudinal feel. The villains too had been a victim of masculinity. In most cases, they were matured lad supported by a pool of unskilled and bulky looking goons and one sensual *bête noire* which further emphasizes the dominance of masculinity over the feminine roles.

3. THE NEED OF THE STUDY

The portrayal of male characters in bollywood films has always been considered to be that of superior nature and thus very few researches have actually been carried out on that aspect. Having a preconceived notion of dominancy, most of the

researches that have been carried out reflects the level of vulnerability of female representation in the silver screen. In fact, numerous works have been carried out on that dimension and majority of which emphasizes the dominance of male characters either directly or indirectly. Female leads are still considered to be veiled under the superiority of male heroes. Jayati Ramakrishnan [3] finds women still fail to identify truly with the way heroines are portrayed in films. The article speaks a volume about the portrayal of women characters in films and equally compares with the present scenario of the nation. According to the author women still serves as mere object of gratification for the male protagonist and nothing seemed an aberration from the way it has been portrayed over the years. In fact very few films have actually tried to depict a much real situation of women in India beyond its stereotypical 'sex-object' inclinations. The scenario seems utterly true for the famous film scholar Shoma A. Chatterji [4], who in an interview mentioned the inferior roles women played and their objectifying as a mere sex symbol predominated the screen. Male roles, according to her, still form the epicenter for most of the recent movies. Kunasry Menon [5] in her blog Gender representation in Bollywood films criticizes the way women are symbolized as item girls and mentions about the passive roles provided to women in comparison to the active roles harnessed by male stars with special emphasis on unbalanced gender representation. Even psychoanalytic studies have been conducted on the way a female characters are been symbolized. Laura Mulvey [6] in her seminal work of Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema considered the angle of capturing images in a film to be highly male dominated. According to her study, the camera takes the role of viewer's eye (male viewers) in scanning the female characters for voyeuristic and sexual pleasure – the male gaze. As far as masculinity is considered, studies have been done mostly imparting to health issues, in terms of drawing relation between masculinity and public domain [7] and identifying masculinity at various levels of society [8]. Masculinity has been understood in terms of various programming and its corresponding change in the attitude of male stars in relation with the type or genre of film or TV show [9].

The characteristics of masculinity were emphasized to be that of resistance, non-conformity, feminized appearance, pre-metrosexuality, and the male star as object of desire [10]. The study incorporated the usage of documentary research and a set of eleven semi-structured interview in order to identify the changing representation of men and masculinities the period of 60's in the UK and the legacy of that impact. In fact, studies on masculinity have also been linked with practice of suicide [11].

From the above study, it is identified that very few studies have actually been carried out on the depiction of male characters in cinematic aspects especially in India. Thus there exists the need to carry a study on masculinity and female gaze from bollywood's perspective to understand the change modern portrayal of male characters have ushered in our society.

4. THE CHANGE

Modern bollywood heroes prefer to depict their own style in almost all films they are assigned. Their characterization has undergone a myriad change with more influencing look taking into play. Not only are our heroes a simple romantic dude or an angry man fighting all odds (as has been the case during 80's and 90's). With the logic and structure of film turning more complex and reality-based, the character chosen to portray the same widened the prospect for new as well as old cluster ones to try different roles. From comedy to tragedy, action to non-fiction, in almost all genres of film making, heroes are being depicted from various angles with different new perspectives.

Action still remains the dominant area and the ways heroes are depicted have been completely anew with their power packed performance. Films like *Singham* (2011, 2014) and *Rowdy Rathore* (2012) redefined masculinity with stronger zeal and enthusiasm about the means how action sequences are to be made and providing the hero more of God-like appreciation which the films in earlier days truly lacked. Violence too has been redefined with the characters turning stronger and their act more gruesome, turning the angry man of 80s and 90s further angrier in this century and mention may be made of the film *Ghajini* (2008) where the shovel hit on head deeply stirred the minds of the audience. *Fight Club-Members Only* (2006) provided a glimpse how a film can be scripted only on the concept of one aspect- fighting- a complete new to the bollywood fraternity and took the masculinity quotient higher with similar films like *Apne* (2007), *Race 2* (2013), *Brothers* (2015).

What is more appreciating has been the entry of certain fresh characters whose presence compels the society to think and act accordingly. From being a responsible citizen (Shahrukh Khan in *Swadesh*, 2004; Nasseruddin Shah in *A Wednesday*, 2008; Salman Khan in *Jai Ho*, 2014) to courageous teacher (Amitabh Bachan in *Black*, 2005; Aamir Khan in *Tare Zameen Par*, 2007), from symbolizing youth power (various male characters in films like *Dil Chahta Hain*, 2001; *Yuva*, 2004; *Rang De Basanti*, 2006) to a simple sperm donor (Ayushman Khurana in *Vicky Donor*, 2012; Purabh Kohli in *I am*, 2011) films have opened fresh avenues to be experimented and even idealized. The portrayal of homosexual (especially gay) characters has been a common affair in the big screen now with certain films

making a strong presence of them in a serious tone like the one in *Bombay Talkies* (2013) while some making a mock out of the same as in *Student of the Year* (2012) and even some taking its concept to make a film (*Dostana*, 2008; *Dunno Y Na Jaane Kyun...*, 2010). Male characters have shown never before leap in its appearance and incessantly pushing the limits of each character to attain new heights. In fact, item numbers have also turned to be a staple of most of the leading actors curbing a different niche about their personality. The popularity of item numbers have been women dominated until recently when actors too started to swing in those tunes.

Sports have turned to be the central theme of many films that have helped attain a new feat for India cinema and its characterization. *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (2001) enthralled the nation with its spirit of patriotism blended with the so called gentlemen's game while *Iqbal* (2005) focused on the turmoil of a poor dumb boy to be a part of national cricket team. *Jannat* (2008) opened the avenues to understand the darker side of the game while in *Kai Po Che!* (2013) the game leads the climax of the story. Even the cricketers of Indian team act as part of the film like the one in *Mujsho Shaddi Karogi* (2004). The importance of hockey as our national game has been showcased in the film *Chak De! Indai* (2007) while a film on the Indian track and field sprinter Milkha Singh (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, 2013) brought in fresh appeal to the characterization of the films from sports perspective. Besides these, sports form an important part in creation of the characters like a formula racing star (*Ta Ra Rum Pum*, 2007), an important event of story (*Student Of The Year*, 2012) and many such. In fact, the stories developed in relation to sports help bring interesting lead characters for the audience to explore and enjoy the sportsmanship spirit of the respective game.

Modern day bad men have become more stylistic in their approach and probably choosy in their portrayal. Leading stars carry on the negative roles with more enthusiasm and ease. Villains are no longer grim faced, defamed characters and suffering inferiority complex rather a well established, energetic, dwelling with classy moves that in most cases run higher in popularity quotient when compared with the lead hero. Certain films of Bollywood are in essence dedicated to those negative characters whose box office turn out has been phenomenal. Whether it being the *Dhoom* series (2004, 2006, 2013) or for that matter *Don* (2006, 2011), lead characters form the soul of the film but in a negative light. In fact, playing negative roles has become a trend for many heroes in order to depict their prowess in that field. A corrupt producer (Arjun Rampal in *Om Shanti Om*, 2007), a suspended army professional (Suniel Shetty in *Main Hoon Na*, 2004), a child trafficker (Rishi Kapoor in *Agneepath*, 2012), lover turned villain (Akshay Khanna

in *Humraaz*, 2002; Emran Hashmi in *Murder*, 2004), a henpecked husband (Ritesh Deshmukh in *Ek Villain*, 2014) and many more crucial roles have been effectively portrayed in a negative tone by leading actors. In fact, director, producer Karan Johar opt negative look in *Bombay Velvet* (2015), a complete new trend for the film industry.

4.1 Female ‘other’ gaze

Female gaze tends to be the way a male body is being objectified for fulfilling a carnal pleasure by women viewers. Having chiseled body, multiple abs, charismatic looks and robust features rule the space like never before. Bollywood has evolved a long way in making its heroes more popular and many a times larger than life giving somewhat pseudo-real effect. Reel life often gets merged into real happenings and for this particular instance the increasing number of fitness centre is a glaring example. The society, especially for the new techno savvy generation, fitness has turned to be an important aspect popularized so incessantly by films over last decade. Bare bodied heroes are complete new entry for the bollywood films over last few years. Though earlier heroes did flaunt their muscles, but rarely there was a mix of perfect tones and cuts. The actors in films like *Dostana* (John Abraham), *Om Shanti Om* (Shahrukh Khan), *Sawariya* (Ranbir Kapoor), *Dhisoom* (John Abraham, Varun Dhawan), *Happy New Year* (Arjun Rampal), *Aiyya* (Prithviraj Sukumaran), *Dhoom 2, 3* series (Hrithik Roshan, Amir Khan), *Ghajni* (Aamir Khan), and most of the films of Salman Khan, have been highly sensitized in their way of framing their shots. The camera in most aspects traces the instances of overt female gaze that a woman enjoys in viewing the same. The close up shots of packs and curves in a male body do represent strength at one hand but at the other provides an escape for the female viewers to enjoy the sexual connotations attached within the visuals. The masculinity has been symbolized as certain required physical outlook which acts as a pleasure ride for the viewers. Besides these, females enjoying the pleasure of sex have been the theme of many films where the males turn to be the victims of lust and sex. Films like *Aitraaz* (2004), *BA Pass* (2013) and *Love Games* (2016) portray such consequences.

The other side of the coin has begun to make its appearance more frequent and vivid. Not only are we sensitized with male gaze and way a female character is being portrayed, the female gaze too has become trendier happening in bollywood films. In fact, there arises the concept of *gaze ratio* where a film can be judged in the terms of its male and female gaze. Not only in terms of sexual connotation only, the gaze ratio of a film can be effective in understanding the means of portraying the overall male and female characters in understanding the dominancy

of the particular gender as per the demand of the script and the way these characters are depicted in order to achieve that outlook.

5. CONCLUSION

The Indian film industry at present produces the highest number of films annually. The popularity of this segment of moving picture is undoubtedly phenomenal with a business turnover of crores of rupees. The depiction of characters in films thus demands to be more carefully crafted in order to maintain a healthy reflection of the society in the screen. Film has the power to make people believe and reveal certain facts. It has the power to create a mass opinion by showcasing the need of the people. Characterization of actors as seen in the advent of this century has been widely diverse and more realistic in approach. The makers have begun to use it as a means to spread or make viewers aware of certain information and at the same time help set a new trend for the society to progress. The Indian culture has a definite look in relation to its tradition, but the modern filmmakers with least hesitation has at many points watershed those beliefs and presented in a complete different picture of what is actually real. The reel life and real one can hardly be demarcated and it has shaped a new experience in understanding the essence of that film. The hitherto unknown became known to all, the voiceless received at least a means to tell their story and the audience reframed their concept and understanding of society for that matter even India. Male characterization, thus in days to come, in the hands of modern filmmakers will be visually more appealing, realistically more intense, and redefine the storyline in never before dimension.

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