

‘What “She” Was...’: Representations of Women in Films – A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Women in India have been stereotyped for as long as History could have known. The question that arises is why are women defined in such stereotypical roles? Is it because of the Indian culture, society or religion? Despite the era of globalization and rapid transformation, why have gendered roles in India, not changed at the same pace as patterns and trends? Why has mindset not changed as rapidly as we have in the fields of technology? We do see progress, but not as rapid as compared to other elements. One very important aspect of modernity and technology in media. Media, in all its forms, is one of the influential forces of any thought; be it political, social or cultural. This paper intends to focus on how women are represented in the entertainment media and why, with a special reference to Historical/periodical dramas. Cultural ideologies affect the role of women not just in society but also shape the portrayal of women in television and films. Historical dramas have also changed with time, representing the era they are made in but do the portrayals of women change or do they remain stagnant? The paper would discuss the elements that caused such portrayals. This paper will also compare similarities and differences between how women have been represented in non-historical themed films and historically themed films.

Keywords: Culture Ideologies, Gendered Roles, Indian Culture, Periodical and Historical Drama

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Introduction

From the women on the streets to the women on the screens, they all have one thing in common – they are stereotyped. The role and position of women in India have always been a topic of general and academic discussion. Culturally Indian women have always been considered inferior to men, they are seen as weak individuals, having secondary positions compared to that of men. India has been a male-dominated society, where women are considered as vulnerable and a liability, causing women to possess low decision-making rights. Girls are raised to accept and adjust to the male-dominated patriarchal society. Although in ancient Indian scriptures women have been regarded as having a higher position compared to men, the reality is rather different. The same is also reflected in the Indian entertainment and media industry. India has been a male-dominated society, where women are made to adjust and accept the patriarchal norms. This unequal treatment of women is reflected in media in general and in the Indian cinema industry in particular (Bollywood Cash 2003). This paper is an attempt to look into some of the social and cultural stereotypical representations of women through the entertainment industry, the paper focuses on the Hindi film industry. We will investigate a few Hindi films from the Historical/periodical drama genre of Hindi cinema, taken as case studies to understand why the portrayal of a certain character was done in the particular way that it was, the causation and its significance. But before we get into the representations of women in the films, we will briefly discuss how women have been stereotyped in society and culture.

From walking in short dresses or jeans, assumed as seeking the male gaze or wearing an Indian suit and being termed as ‘*unmodern*’. These remarks are not just passed men, but surprisingly, women who pass such remarks. When women are stereotyped, it is not just by men, in fact, it occurs more commonly by women. Shocking but women also stereotype other women. The influences of historical and socio-cultural factors have led to the stereotyping of women off-screen and on-screen. This on-screen portrayal further aggravates the off-screen stereotyping – making it a circular and never-ending process.

Stereotyping – The Ideology

Most widely women who do make it successful in the entertainment industry, are either playback singers or actresses. Ganti (2004) believes that the Indian film industry is a male-dominated industry. Gokulsing and Dissnayake (2004) have pointed out that women are usually given two kinds of roles in commercial cinema – the mother and the wife. The former is represented culturally as the supreme form of feminine energy, as the Mother Goddess, as the caregiver and nurturer. The latter is based on the cultural representation of the ideal wife – *Sita* of the famous epic Ramayana, and *Savitri* from the book *Vana Parva* “The Book of the Forest” of the Mahabharata – the two embodiments of extreme devotion to the husband – immortalized the representation of ideal women. Similarly, Richards (1995) states, “The Hindi film upholds the traditional patriarchal views of society, which fearful of female sexuality, demands of the woman, a subjugation of her desire.” Hence, we can say that cinema plays an essential role in shaping views about gender roles and gender identities within the context that women are inferior to men. (Bagchi 1996 and Ram 2002). Cinema plays a vital role in shaping society’s beliefs and practices. The woman who is not confined within the social patterns is represented as the ‘*vamp*’ or the ‘bad woman’. She is the total contrast to the ‘mother’ and ‘wife’, especially the latter.

Stereotyping – The Practice

Commercial films portray the “ideal women” as submissive, self-sacrificing, loyal, chaste and controlled (Dasgupta and Hegde 1988). The ‘bad woman’ on the contrary is portrayed as independent, sexually aggressive, westernized (the ideal woman always wears the Indian attire) and unwilling to make sacrifices. These stereotyped portrayals have always been a debate amongst feminist scholars. As Blewitt (1974) highlights that “Films are one of the great storehouses one of society’s stereotypes about women.” In an analysis of the stereotypical representations of relationships between men and women, it is common that many highly popular movies depicted women as the primary caregiver with no identity of their own and is dependent on the man (Woods 1994). Mulvey (1975) states, “Movies have always portrayed women as ‘sexual objects’, the way men would enjoy seeing them on the silver screen.” Women are portrayed as being more submissive and favourable as compared to men (Powers, Rothman and Rothman 1996). Females are objectified by their physical appearance, a slender body and attractive figures are high in demand (Signorielli, 1997 and Lippa 2005). In India, this trend has gone a step further which require the female protagonist (in movies) to be fair in complexion and thin. Obese and curvy women were always portrayed as comic or side characters. Stereotyping of physical appearance has affected real-life too – a fair and thin girl was the ideal lover or wife, while the obese or dark girl was to befriend or to be made teased and make fun of. These factors affected the marriage patterns within Indian society, where a fair and thin girl would be sought for an arranged marriage and a fat or dark girl would be rejected for marriage.

The portrayal of women in the history of Indian films from the era of silent films to the present day have undergone numerous changes but despite these changes, the stereotypical representation of female characters in cinema remains almost the same due to the historical and cultural elements of society (Nandkumar, 2011; Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2004). Many film scholars opine this is due to the influence of Manusmriti, an ancient Indian (read Hindu) text which stated the code of conduct guiding the social and cultural (including the familial) lives of individuals. A woman had to play the roles of a daughter, sister, then as wife, daughter-in-law and mother. She had limitations and a set of roles and responsibilities which she is expected to carry out. At each stage, her sexual fidelity had to be protected, and for this, a man was required to be her protector – in the form of father, brother, husband or son, consequently heightening patriarchy. Nandkumar (2011) adds, the themes concerning family, marriage and performing the various roles conformed to family values and became pivotal in most commercial Bollywood films. This immensely appealed to the patriarchal social structure. The women who did not do this were the negative characters – the vamp. They were women who disrespected the traditional values and norms, displayed traits of an immoral person with unacceptable and offensive behaviour, having habits of drinking, smoking, partying and being promiscuous (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2004). Whether as the vamp or as the heroine (female protagonist), the Hindi cinema industry had one fixed rule, the actress playing either of the roles had to be young and attractive – another level of stereotyping of women.

It is not just Bollywood (the popular term for the commercial Hindi film industry) that depicts women in a certain way (or as we are pointing out here – the stereotypical representation). According to Fischer (2011) even Hollywood places emphasis on women’s sexuality, demeanour and appearance. It is very common that women in most cases are shown as weak, gentle, passive and emotional in commercial cinema (Hofstede 1998). In contrast, men are portrayed as the real heroes, tough, powerful, successful aggressive,

independent etc. (Hofstede 1998 and Signorelli, 2001). It is the duty of the men – the heroes to protect the women. It is not surprising that Hollywood has influenced Bollywood in many ways, be it from copying the thematic plot to applying technical effects or even more, the stereotypical representations. India had opened its gates for foreign (read Hollywood) movies in the year 1992 when the Government of India liberalized the demand for films. The most popular of them was Jurassic Park 1994, followed by Titanic, 1998.

The ‘Historical’ Genre of Cinema

Bollywood movies consist of numerous genres such as action, family, romance, horror, mythological, suspense/thriller, biopics and so on. Some are high-budget commercial films while others can be low budget – both being of similar genres. The stereotypical representations of women can be seen in almost all genres of Hindi cinema. It is only the experimental (read art) cinema that challenges certain protocols. The genre that this paper will study is the ‘*Historical*’ (also periodical drama). In film studies, the *Historical* and the *Periodical* are two separate genres, because the ‘*Historical*’ is the film based on real characters from academic history while the ‘*Periodical drama*’ is that which is loosely based on history (not using authentic sources of history) or a drama created of a historical period or character (less or not known in academic history, at times, based on myths and folklore). In Indian cinema (not just Hindi, but all languages – cinema of India) in most instances, these differences get overlapped. While one character in the plot is factual, the other characters are somewhat mythical or have been derived from folklore, making it difficult to categorize it as a ‘*Historical*’ or ‘*periodical*’ in the proper sense. One famous purely periodical film, that can be seen as an example is the internationally acclaimed S.S. Rajamouli’s ‘*Bahubali*’ parts 1 and 2; originally in Telugu language but was dubbed in all major Indian languages became popular worldwide; had no historical truth and was purely a period (fiction) drama. If one studies that film as an example, one cannot deny the stereotypical representations of women as mentioned above in the paper.

In Hindi cinema, we have numerous films that fall under the ‘*Historical/Periodical drama*’ genre, from the very recent *Tanhaji* (2020), *Panipat* (2019), *Manikarnika – the Queen of Jhansi* (2019), *Padmaavat* (2018), *Mohenjo-Daro* (2016), *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), *Mangal Pandey* (2005), *Asoka* (2001) to the older ones such as *Shatranj ke Khiladi (The Chess Players)* (1977), *Amrapali* (1966), *Taj Mahal* (1963), *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Sikandar* (1941) and so on. Another category under ‘*Historical*’ comprises biopic films based on popular personalities (freedom fighters, politicians, sports etc.) such as *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013) and most recently, *Sardar Udham* (2021). War movies based on the military history of India such as *Border* (1997) and *LOC Kargil* (2003) to name a few, as well as Partition-themed films, have also been a part of ‘*Historical*’.

Stereotypical Representations of Women in Hindi ‘Historical’ Cinema

Film historians have always been critical of the genre of *historical* films on the grounds of distorting the historical truth. At times, that is done at the cost of distorting history, emphasizing popular culture and folk culture, keeping the entertainment and mass in mind rather than the academic credible history. However, the purpose of this paper is not to discuss the historical accuracy of these films. We shall discuss the representation of the female characters from some of the above-mentioned films and understand how women, of the past, have been portrayed through these characters shaped by contemporary ideas of stereotyping

women. The first point to be pointed out here is that a common representation of women characters in the films mentioned above is that they all play secondary roles to their male counterparts, even if the story does revolve around the central female character e.g., *Padmaavat*, but the character still ends up secondary to the two male characters. The women are shown as the mothers (even sisters) or the wives – as the support of the male characters. We can see them as follows:

- ‘She’ is the dutiful wife in the form of *Savitribai Malusare* – wife Tanhaji Malusare (played by Kajol in *Tanhaji*) and *Parvati bai* (played by Kirti Sanon in *Panipat*) who never abandons her husband through the toughest of times and is even willing to accept her husband’s martyrdom for his land and kingdom.
- ‘She’ is the wife who becomes the beacon of positive changes in her partner’s life, in the form of *Jodhaa* (played by the elegant Aishwarya Rai in *Jodhaa Akbar*) who is shown as the reason why Jalaluddin (Hrithik Roshan) became increasingly tolerant towards Rajputs, non – Islamic religions, his kingdom and its people. He learnt “not to rule people but to win their hearts”, hence bestowed the title ‘Akbar’ (meaning the Greatest).
- ‘She’ is the extremely chaste and loyal wife, Queen *Padmavati* [also known as Padmini] (played by the gorgeous Deepika Padukone in *Padmaavat*) prefers to accept death, through committing ‘*Jauhar*’¹ over being taken as someone else’s (Sultan Alauddin Khilji played by Ranveer Singh) lover or second wife. It not only signifies the socio-cultural past and customs of the Rajputs of India who believed strongly in their honour and dignity, but one can think the talented director and storyteller, Sanjay Leela Bhansali is trying to spread the message for the modern-day woman.
- ‘She’ is also the wife who is helpless and has to give up her husband to another woman, whom he betroths as his second wife (or lover) as *Kashi bai* (played by the graceful Priyanka Chopra in *Bajirao Mastani*) and Queen *Nagamati* – first wife of Maharawal Ratan Singh – king of Chittor (played by Shahid Kapoor) and *Mehrunissa* – previous wife of Sultan Alauddin Khilji (both not having much screen time, the former played by Anupriya Goenka and the latter played by Aditi Rao Hydari) in *Padmaavat*. Although immensely hurt due to the actions of their husband, they had to accept the situation and keep continuing their wifely duties as normal. They could not question their husband or could not walk out of the marriage.
- ‘She’ is the obedient lover who is willing to stake her life but will not separate from her lovers, such as *Mastani* (once again played by the gorgeous Deepika Padukone in *Bajirao Mastani*) and *Anarkali* (played by the yesteryears’ most graceful, Madhubala in *Mughal-e-Azam*). They are willing to endure humiliation and torture but do not give up on their love. One can also see it as the hardships women will have to go through if they fall in love and the sacrifices, they should be willing to make.

¹ Jauhar, Jowhar or Juhar, was a Rajput practice of mass self-immolation by women, or otherwise execution by their husbands, fathers or brothers, in India, to avoid capture, enslavement and rape by an invading (read Islamic) army, when facing certain defeat during a war.

- ‘She’ is also surprisingly the nautch girl², *Heera* (played by Rani Mukherjee in *Mangal Pandey*) and the courtesans *Anarkali* (from *Mughal-e-Azam*) and *Amrapali* (played by another one of yesteryears’ popular leading lady, Vyajantimala in *Amrapali*) – who after falling in love with the male protagonist transforms into the loyal and chaste lovers. Both *Amrapali* and *Anarkali*, though of different times, have one thing in common – they are court dancers. Their existence in history is unknown and uncertain, yet the filmmaker has weaved a plot around them passing a social message. Historically *Amrapali* belonged to the *ganika* (courtesan)³ tradition of Ancient India. Another common feature is that both *Anarkali* and *Amrapali* were responsible for the waging of war by the male characters for them. Prince Salim (played by Dilip Kumar) against his father Emperor Akbar (played by Prithviraj Kapoor) and for the latter, *Ajatshatru* (played by Sunil Dutt) against the kingdom. Hence ‘She’ is also the reason men go to war – a concept even Western history follows. Unlike the two, *Heera* is sold in the market and lacks their etiquette and grace.
- ‘She’ is the mother who guides her son, sacrifices or endures hardships or emotional pain in the form of having to separate from her son for his benefit or happiness, in the form of *Maharani Jija bai* – Chhatrapati Shivaji’s mother (played by Padmavati Rao in *Tanhaji*), *Jodha bai* (played by Durga Khote in *Mughal-e-Azam*), *Hamida Banu Begum* – Akbar’s mother (played by Poonam Sinha in *Jodhaa Akbar*) and *Radhabai* – Bajirao’s mother (played by Tanvi Azmi in *Bajirao Mastani*). Another character we can study here is *Maham Anga* (played Ila Arun in *Jodhaa Akbar*) who is ‘like’ the mother, wet-nurse to the young Jalal (main male character), and his royal vizier (advisor). Historically also a well-known figure. She is shown as his most trusted confidante, more than his real mother that is before she tricked the emperor into parting ways with his accused but innocent wife *Jodhaa*.
- ‘She’ is also the warrior in the form of *Mastani* (from *Bajirao Mastani*) who fights whilst she was a princess but after being in love with Peshwa Bajirao, she becomes domiciled. As a mother, she takes up the sword only to protect her son. Another appropriate example is *Rani Lakshmi (Laxmi) bai*, the historic queen of Jhansi (played by the fiery Kangana Ranaut in *Manikarnika – the queen of Jhansi*). The Queen of Jhansi was a famous female leader in the Mutiny of 1857, who fought against the British to protect her kingdom of Jhansi which was usurped after the death of her husband – Gangadhar Rao and refusal to accept their adopted son as the next rightful heir to the throne. Although the film has been famous for how the filmmakers (one of them being Ranaut herself), added the feminist fervour to the plot making it what film critics called ‘over exaggerating’; despite all that before she becomes the warrior, she is expected (through dialogues) to be the good wife and mother – which she carries out – a loyal and loving wife and mother. In a scene after she is widowed and has to perform the rituals of widowhood, she refuses on the grounds that she has a country to run; in another scene, she has been symbolized as the Hindu Goddess Kali.

² A nautch girl is a dancer who made a living by entertaining men (at times with family) of all social classes, regions, castes and religions on various occasions including parties, weddings, religious ceremonies, and other social events. The culture of the performing art of the nautch rose to prominence during the later period of the Mughal Empire, and the rule of the East India Company. At times went synonymous with prostitutes under British rule.

³ *Ganika* was a courtesan or a court dancer. Trained in fine arts like music and dance in order to entertain kings, princes and wealthy patrons only on religious and social occasions. The institution seems to have been prevalent since the Vedic Age playing a significant role in preserving India’s cultural heritage and finds mention in Buddhist and Jain literature of Ancient India.

- ‘She’ is also the helpless sister, *Bakshi Banu* (played by Abreer Abrar in *Jodhaa Akbar*) who represents the stereotypical roles that were given to sisters in Indian films. She is married to the negative character who becomes the cause of Jodhaa’s brothers’ death and also conspires against Akbar. She is the reason why Akbar cannot kill him, as he cannot widow his own sister.
- ‘She’ is also the domesticated *Jwala* (played by Amisha Patel from *Mangal Pandey*) who faces the wrath of Indian men and is the victim of social customs prevalent in India. She is widowed due to a mismatched marriage⁴ and was forced into committing Sati⁵ – from which she was saved by a white man, the British officer Captain William Gordon (played by Toby Stephens). As mentioned by Gayatri Spivak – ‘*white men are saving brown women from brown men*’ on self-immolation in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’⁶

Conclusion

Women, as discussed at the beginning of this paper, have been represented on screen primarily as the mother and the lover/wife and as sisters or daughters in small or secondary roles. The woman is the torchbearer of the customs and society, and it is her duty to ensure that culture and tradition retain their importance. For that, she as a mother is expected to instil in her children and as a wife, she has to practice it for her family and society. Her role as a homemaker one of the qualities of the ideal wife is also shown in historical dramas, like *Jodhaa* from *Jodhaa Akbar*, albeit the Empress of India, is shown cooking for her husband – a wifely duty and a form of displaying love. Her wifely duties which require her to withstand all hardships alongside her husband is shown as *Parvati bai* from *Panipat*. As the daughter-in-law, she has to retain family honour and pride like *Kashi bai* from *Bajirao Mastani*. As mentioned earlier, the wife has always been inspired by the mythological characters of Sita (from the epic *Ramayana*) and the legendary Savitri (from the book *Vana Parva* “The Book of the Forest” of the *Mahabharata*)– the two embodiments of ideal wives. They nurture, face hardships and are extremely chaste and obedient to their husband, for whom they would not think twice before accepting death rather than accepting another man (read honour and dignity). A representation of this was the famous self-immolation shown in the scenes from *Bajirao Mastani* when the kingdom of Bundelkhand is under attack and the women prepare the fire pit; and who can forget the famous last scene of *Padmaavat*, which has all the women committing Jauhar. A woman holds the strings to a united family (as in India the joint family structure was prevalent and considered ideal) but she can cause breaking the family ties, due to her personal jealousies or insecurities, inspired by Kaikeyi of the epic *Ramayana*, (Lord Rama’s step-mother who compelled King Dashrath to send Rama to exile so that her son Bharat can be the next king of Ayodhya) such as *Gopika bai* (played by Padmini Kolhapure) from *Panipat*.

So how different are the representations of women in other genres and historical/periodical dramas, it is expected that representations and roles of women must have gone through

⁴ A mismatched marriage in India was when the age gap was very wide between husband and wife, at times being more than 20 years. Also, the result of child marriage, where the bride was a child below the age of 10 and the groom could range between 20-80 years of age.

⁵ *Sati or suttee* is(was) a Hindu practice, now mostly historical, in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre, self-immolating herself. Developed as a fire sacrifice in the medieval era within the Rajput clan which spread during the late medieval era.

⁶ G. C. Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), p. 93.

changes from then to now, just like we have advanced in other fields. This can be explained through two reasons – firstly, Indian culture and the masses try to retain their cultural past, in which women had specific roles to play, so whether a historical character or a regular modern-day character in a commercial or family drama, common representations exist. The second reason that can be brought out here is even if the historical/periodical drama portrays a period of the past, it is still embedded with the contemporary ideologies and understandings because history although is the study of the past, is still perceived from the present-day lens. We cannot forget E. H. Carrs’ famous statement – “*History is a dialogue between the present and the past.*” (Carr, What is History).

For instance, we have two characterizations of Jodhaa (one from Jodhaa Akbar by the sleek slender Aishwarya Rai) portraying the Jodha bai in her youth as a princess and a wife while the other from Mughal-e-Azam is a mother (played by Durga Khote). The two films have been made at a gap of 48 years. Both Jodhas have been represented as idealised wives of their times, reflecting the filmmakers’ idea that it is how it happened then, and it is how it should happen now. Unlike Jodha bai of Mughal-e-Azam who attends royal court and performances with her husband, Jodha of Jodhaa Akbar, keeps herself confined to her palace, strolling in gardens, writing/drawing. Young Jodhaa is a princess who stands up for her rights and respect, even if it means distancing away from her husband- whom she loves. She has the power (or audacity) to fight with her husband unlike the older Jodha, who worships her husband like a deity. The same historical figure, but the difference in their representation due to the fact that the former Jodha is a mother-figure, aged hence, toned down unlike the young, hot-blooded Jodha; shaped by their contemporary time periods viz. 1960 and 2008, but in the end, both are domesticated. Hence, whether a woman is within or beyond royalty, a woman has to be domesticated. This domestication is most visible in her position as a ‘wife’, as her role with her husband and his family is all set up within the patriarchal set-up and is equally distinguishable. Hence, when a filmmaker conceives a character, he not only imagines it within the framework of his set of beliefs but also brings out a portrayal of an idealised character, so they become a role model for the audience.

In films, these characters do not just show how contemporary women in real should behave but also there are hidden messages which can be perceived behind the representation and the manner in which they have been shown. Even as her representation in the warrior queen Lakshmi Bai, the Rani (queen) of Jhansi, before marriage as brave to kill a tiger, after marriage willingly accepts her domesticated roles of a caring wife and nurturing mother and situations turn her into a warrior, which is justified as her representation as Goddess Kali⁷ - although a warrior but still a caring mother. To add here, General Hugh Rose in his autobiography wrote about Rani Laxmi Bai’s bravery and courage that “She was a *man* among mutineers”⁸, the statement unintentionally states that only men can be brave. Apart from arousing nationalist sentiments (released on the occasion of India’s Republic Day), the film was not well-received amongst the masses for two reasons – i) high feminist angles and ii) over-exaggeration of the historical event – very obviously that masses do not like women who step out of their social roles beyond a certain point.

⁷ Kali is the Hindu goddess of death and doomsday. Kali embodies *shakti* - feminine energy and fertility. She is an incarnation or the vengeful enraged version of Parvati, wife of the great Hindu god Shiva. She is often associated with sexuality and violence at the same time a strong mother figure and symbol of motherly love.

⁸ P.K. Balachandran, Rani of Jhansi through the eyes of Britishers, Hindustan Times, May 10, 2007. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/rani-of-jhansi-through-the-eyes-of-britishers/story-YnF7mbxWHJwUuuyR3Z0UWL.html>

With time representation of women roles in Hindi cinema are visible. This is more prevalent in art cinema or experimental cinema than the regular commercial (big-budget) films. Those who have invested their money in the commercial cinema expect returns hence they only wish to show what appeals to the masses, unlike art cinema and other genres which are lower budget but are open to taking the risk of representing women in their un-stereotypical or anti-social roles, but the audience to such cinema is still comparatively lesser than the former.

The paper does not in any way denounce the role of women as mothers and wives, it is an attempt to look into a certain structure, through films, in which these roles have been defined and affixed.

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