



A Psychoanalytic-Feminist Study of Gender Bias in Indian Cinema

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Abstract— Psychoanalytic feminism is a theory of oppression which asserts that men have an inherent psychological need to subjugate women. The root of men's compulsion to dominate women and women's minimal resistance to subjugation lies deep within the human psyche. Indian film industry has been phallogocentric depicting mainly male dominated narrative structure whereas women are reduced to marginalized roles only to glamorize the hero-centric set up. These films rarely portray women and their isolated worlds because this subject would be a commercial set back preventing audiences from hitting the theatres. This stereotyped representation of women has been always criticized by feminist film critics. Laura Mulvey, one of the most influential feminist film critic in her 1975 seminal essay "Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema" criticizes this patriarchal control and for-profit nature of cinema using psychoanalytic theory. Considering Mulvey's psychoanalytic theory, this research paper attempts to explore that how social construction of patriarchy determines gender stereotyping & phallogocentrism in Indian film industry and seeks to examine the various factors behind the misrepresentation of women in Indian cinema. The paper further intends to take into account why male centric films receive huge commercial success as compared to female ones.

Keywords— Psychoanalytic theory, Laura Mulvey, Patriarchy, Indian cinema and Women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's full and equal participation in all facets of society is a fundamental human right. Yet, around the world from politics to entertainment and to the workplace the status of women has been largely underrepresented. The Indian cinematic industry has been among the nation's most popular source of entertainment, and being a patriarchal society there exists a stern social structure in which the role of a woman is delineated and this specific role in the social scheme finds its way into the role of women in cinema as well (Habib, 2017, p.69).

Molly Haskell in her 1974 book "From Reverence To Rape" studied the portrayal of women in cinema and mentioned that, the social construction of women on the screen is very much similar to the what was found in society. The stereotyped representation of women in cinematic industry has been always criticized by feminist film critics. To bring

gender equality by demonstrating the importance of women, feminist film critics came forward with their major film theories. The development of feminist film theory was influenced by second wave feminism & women's studies in the 1960s and 1970s initially in the United States. Feminist film theory was extremely instrumental and influential in providing an 'alternate feminist way to look' at films. Feminist film criticism is seen as an advocacy for gender equality by dismantling the patriarchal system that is often centred on male subjectivity and female objectification.

II. DISCUSSING LAURA MULVEY AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

The concept of psychoanalysis was first popularized by the famous psychologist, Sigmund Freud which is based on the belief that all humans have deep unconscious beliefs, desires, thoughts and memories that arise from their prior

experiences or hidden conflicts in their thought process (McLeod, 2019).

One of the most notable feminist film critic Laura Mulvey is the first to analyze the objectification of women in films using psychoanalytic approach. In her 1975 seminal essay "Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema" she uses psychoanalytic theory to explain how patriarchy subconsciously affects the ways in which we produce and receive cinematic images. Mulvey's essay gives the most thoroughgoing and explicit introduction of neo-Freudian-psychoanalytic theory to feminist film studies, and is the single most inescapable reference work in this field. She proposed that films should not be seen as merely a form of entertainment, rather we should consider the various facts about how it was made and how it has been received in our society (Singh, 2021).

Mulvey draws on the works of both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan throughout her essay, showing how unconscious fears and desires manifest in the way films are created and viewed. Freud's description of scopophilia (pleasure in looking) is the starting point of Mulvey's theory. Like Freud, Mulvey associates scopophilia with voyeurism, in which a viewer derives pleasure from looking at a subject and further said that, centred around the spectator's and the camera's look, cinema offers identificatory pleasure with one's on-screen likeness, ego ideal and libidinal gratification from the object of the gaze (White, 1998). Other principles of psychoanalysis on which Mulvey relies are the concepts of Freud's Ego & Castration complex and the Lacanian mirror stage. In this regard she states that this ego, is what lures viewers into identifying themselves with the masculinized identity of the film and finds identification with the hero which in turn helps the viewer to transcend to a position of power, by observing himself as an active & dominant character while subjecting female characters to passive and powerless position. Similarly, Mulvey associates the Lacan's example of a child recognizing himself in the mirror as a separate identity from his parents, in the same way as of an audience recognizing himself with the male counterpart of the film which in turn promotes the concept of phallocentrism by portraying man characters as maker of meaning while females as the bearer of meaning in the narratives of cinema.

Another tenet of psychoanalysis is the concept of Castration complex, which according to Mulvey, denotes the anxiety produced in males by the fact that women are without a phallus and as such women come to represent, on an unconscious level the threat of castration; and as a result of which women are objectified by the camera and alienated by plot in order to mitigate the latent threat they pose to male protagonists and the male spectators.

III. ANALYZING THE PORTRAYAL OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS IN INDIAN CINEMA

Mulvey states that cinema deploys unconscious mechanisms in which the image of a woman functions as a signifier of sexual difference, confirming man as subject and maker of money while woman as the bearer of meaning (White, 1998). The cinema narratives and portrayals of women in cinema are constructed in an objectifying and limiting manner to satisfy the psychological desires of men, and more broadly, of this patriarchal society; which suggests that women are not placed in a role where they can take control of a scene instead, they became merely an object to be admired and fetishized rather than an active dynamic character.

In the context of cinema, it's mostly men who write the films we watch, mostly men who make those films and it's men who are basically the target audiences (Leonard, 2021). The film industry all over the world is male dominated from the directors to producers, to lead actors and even the viewers in theatres. According to a study carried out by a group of researchers from IBM Research-India, IIT-Delhi and DTU-Delhi it is observed that, a male is mentioned around 30 times in a plot while a female is mentioned only around 15 times and in overall dialogue distribution the female characters have only 37% of the dialogues while male have 63% on an average. The study further says that the screen-on-time for females is only a meagre 31.5% compared to 68.5% of the time for male characters, adding, while 80% of the movie plots have more male mentions than females, surprisingly, more than 50% of posters of movies features actresses (Madaan et al., 2018). This clearly shows that films stimulate visual pleasure by integrating structures of voyeurism and narcissism into the story and the image. Both this voyeuristic gaze and narcissistic identification depend for their meaning upon the controlling power of the male character as well as on the objectified representation of the female character (Smelik, 2016).

Although there have been some women oriented movies that seems to be representing the female characters in dominant roles but, these films also resemble the old patriarchally determined identities in a new manner and aroused the question that, whether these kind of movies really offer feminine values to our society?

IV. PSYCHOANALYSIS BEHIND TOP GROSSING MOVIES

The movies that hit highest at the box office are those which are centred around male characters. In these movies, all the active roles, dialogues and on-screen time is dominated by

the hero of the film while the heroine is always portrayed secondary to the hero. Talking about the highest grossing movie at the Indian box office “Baahubali 2: The Conclusion” it can be clearly observed that it is the male character who is the controller of the narrative around whom the story runs. The heroine is devoid of any independent existence and her journey throughout the film is explored in relation to the male character. The prominent example of Mulvey’s psychoanalytic concept can be seen in the narratives of the movies that are in a ranking of the highest grossing films of India; like the role of actress Alia bhatt in the movie RRR is not of any significance to the story; Similarly, the role played by the actress in the movie KGF 2 is only as a decorative object to glamorize the hero-centric set up. Both RRR and KGF2 are the highest grossing films of the year 2022 making more than 1000 crores of money worldwide. These movies are centred around male oriented narrative structure and females are reduced only to playing a role of love interest of the hero and to give audiences a break from the tedious scenes of violence and drama.

Of the 100 highest grossing movies, only few features women as their protagonists and the films led by female actors never really notch up the numbers that led by their male counterparts do. In fact, various actresses have mentioned that it is very difficult for women-centric films to make half as much money as the films with male superstars receive (Habib, 2017). For example, the movie “Gangubai Kathiawadi” which is considered as the box office hit movie led by a female character, has been confined within the collection of only 153.69 crore on the Indian box office.

The kind of success male oriented movies are receiving clearly depicts the male supremacy in our society, which reaffirms the power of the patriarchy to use women as props in service of the heterosexual male narrative. In this regard, Mulvey suggests that women signifies a lack which causes anxiety in the male, so the male seeks to overcome this anxiety by narcissism and objectification; so the implications of characters as active male and passive female illustrates them as being products of a society organized around phallic power. Men writing the films, men making the films, men being the protagonists and the target audiences all combine into shaping a unified heterosexual male perspective of female characters (Leonard, 2021).

V. CONCLUSION

Many of the gender issues found in films originate from us living in a patriarchal society. In other words, we all have been conditioned to adopt this prevailing social structure because this is the way in which we were raised by our

traditional cinema and society. Cinema has always been understood as being a mirror to society; hence, films should be responsive towards the context in which they locate a woman character. There should be a discussion about media’s responsibility to the society and question should be asked that why cinema is engaged only in creating leisure for its audience and not making them think critically about the gender objectification. The patriarchal view of women has been so convenient over the years that these categories have become a common way of life to such an extent that now it is the foundational power structure of society and can not be easily broken; this power structure reinforces the stereotypes which in turn further strengthens the power structure. There is no one monitoring and no one challenging this pattern that is replicating itself; as a result the lack of equality both on and off-screen has raised questions on gender stereotyping, the quality of media being viewed by people and the misinterpretation of a balanced society. It is important to know why these kind of patriarchal settings are being liked by the people and further research is needed in this context.

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