

Chapter 7

The Idea of Femininity in Cinematic Rites of Passage in Bollywood Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Most movies pre-2000 focused on feminine stereotypes conceived within the confined ambit of societal constructs. It is only with the millennium that scriptwriters became bolder in their conception of femininity. Directors and women actors have begun experimenting with unconventional feminine roles which are definitively plausible. The portrayals of new-age peripatetic women like Deepika Padukone's single and successful architect Piku Banerjee, living with her septuagenarian father or Paravathy's urbane, sophisticated, English speaking, corporate executive, the widowed Jaya Shashidharan, prove that fixities have given way to flexibilities in portrayal and form. This chapter seeks to undertake a comprehensive study of the idea of femininity in cinematic rites of passage through an in-depth analysis of Shoojit Sircar's Piku (2015) and Tanuja Chandra's Qarib Qarib Singlle (2017), and show how itinerant women protagonists are negotiating identities by challenging alterity.

INTRODUCTION

The cinematic narrative can serve as the perfect canvas for the recreation of prototypical gendered portrayals. It is more so because, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith posits, "...cinema also played a major role in shaping the world, or at least what we imagine the world to be" (2017, p.74). For the audience, it becomes a text in a motion picture where the delineation of characters, especially women characters, can be revisited and restructured. As a socially powerful medium, the silver screen can further the cause of women by reclaiming the lost or warped idea of femininity. Unlike parallel cinema which explored the complexity of femininity or womanhood, contemporary Hindi cinema is now seeing a deconstruction in the portrayal of women character too. Both mainstream and alternative movie directors and scriptwrit-

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ers are experimenting with women-centric roles that are bolder, assertive, and identifiable. Women on screen are as much real as women in reality- or so is the projection.

The conception of a woman character is now built upon the premise of verisimilitude and not the archetypes, as it used to be in the pre-millennial era. Most movies in pre-2000 period focused on feminine stereotypes- victimised (Meenakshi Sheshadri's Damini in *Damini* [1993]), passive (Kajol's Simran in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* [1995]), sacrificing (Urmila Matondkar's Jahnvi in *Judaai* [1997]), or scheming and malevolent (Sridevi in *Ladlaa*[1994]). Gone are the days when women protagonists were either 'ablaanaari'¹ (Juhi Chawla in *Darr*[1993]), 'gaaonkigori'² (Mahima Chaudhury in *Pardes* [1997]), 'doosriaurat'³ (Sushmita Sen in *Biwi No.1*[1999]), 'tawaai'⁴ (Rekha in *Muqaddarka Sikandar*[1978]) or Rati Agnihotri essaying the eponymous role in *Tawaif* [1985]) or the ubiquitous glamour doll (Bhagyashree in *Maine Pyar Kiya* [1989]),

*Female characters in Indian films comprise only 24.9% of the total, and none of the top ten highest-grossing films in 2014 featured a female lead or co-lead. When women do appear in movies, they are rarely shown in powerful positions. Fewer than 15% of all roles in Indian films depict women as business executives, political figures, or science, technology, engineering, and math professionals. Instead, female characters are commonly presented in gendered occupations such as nurses and teachers, and as wives and mothers.*⁵

Women actors were cast into formulaic moulds conceived within the confined ambit of societal constructs that were restrictive, affording them little or no scope to explore the subtleties of their characters. They marked,

Quite plainly, the boundary every woman must stay within, placing limits on her moral and sexual "wandering." The mythic line embedded in patriarchal imaginary prescribed limits on the behaviour expected of women carefully upheld by the Hindi cinema (Virdi, 2007, p.126).

Even in movies with two women characters, the characters built around stereotypical contrasts (Madhuri's coy Pooja and Karishma's ultra-modern Nisha in *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* [1997] or Kajol's tomboyish Anjali and Rani's chic Tina in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* [1998]). It will not be fallacious to point out that in conventional a.k. *Hindi masala* movies unconventional women portrayals were often those characters who faced retribution-

Jab bhi koi samaj ke niyam todta hai ... maryada ki rekha ka ulangan kartahai ... toh sach much uske paasek hi rasta bachta hai ... prayashchit" (Whenever someone breaks the law of the society ... violates the boundaries of limits ... then really they have only one path left ... atonement) (Taurani & Taurani, 2000).

Most women not allotted enough cinematic space to navigate the nuances of their roles and carve an individual identity of their own. They narrowed the path in the grand cinematic patriarchal narrative which rendered them as binary or mono-dimensional characters. A single woman in the movies till the late 1990s had to be a vamp, a widow, a disabled sister, a jilted-at-the-altar aunt, a conniving mother-in-law, or a coy damsel in distress but never an entrepreneur, a writer, a scientist, a radio jockey, an architect, a financially independent single mom or a corporate executive.

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