

Chapter 12

Breaking Stereotypes: A Paradigm Shift in the Projection of Women in Indian Short Films

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ABSTRACT

Indian films are gradually coming of age: becoming more realistic, bold, and daring. Indian short films are getting candid: talking openly about issues rather than brushing them under the carpet. The digital media boom and the advent of social media have made the short film genre popular. In the fast-paced age where people, caught up in the humdrum and rat race of everyday life, are generally becoming impatient about everything, the short film has come to the rescue of filmmakers and film lovers. Gone are the days where everyone had ample time and patience to watch a three hour feature film or a two hour saga. In case of a short film, the message gets conveyed in a quick, crisp, and focused manner, without beating about the bush. Women-oriented short films like Her First Time, Juice, The Day After Every Day, Mama's Boy, Going Dutch, Pressure Cooker, The Girl Story, Ek Dopahar, Khaney Mein Kya Hai, White Shirt, Naked, etc. are breaking stereotypes of the patriarchal notions about women. The chapter probes the portrayals of women characters in Indian short films.

INTRODUCTION

It is interesting to examine the status of women from the Vedic age to contemporary times. In Vedic times, though women had to live in a patriarchal society, their rights were not denied. However, in the post-Vedic times, customs like the joint-family system, Sati, widow exploitation, and child marriage changed the status of women. Their position from the Vedic times was affected. The *Women in Indian Advertisements: Plots & Perspectives*, Roy (2017) underlines it. According to Manu, “the progenitor of the Hindu race, girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father during their childhood, under the custody of their husbands when married and under the custody of their sons as widows; she should not demand independence.”

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In the medieval age, with the prevalence of polygamy and the purdah system (not limited to Muslim women), women were further marginalised and dominated. Under British rule, the status of women improved a little. With the socio-religious reforms and participation of women in freedom movement due to the encouragement of Mahatma Gandhi, the abolition of Sati, widow remarriage and opening of educational institutions for women, the dynamics of the position of women about men began to change. However, sadly, after seven decades of Indian independence, the area of women vis-à-vis men in Indian society is still unequal. The role, position, and status of women have been reflected thus in different forms of media, not just films (Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2005).

FILM AND SOCIETY

We do not merely view the films. Rather they do have impacts on us. We experience them. We live vicariously through the medium of cinema. We are all curious to know about the stories of people around us. And film portrays these stories in a vivid manner. It is difficult to ascertain where the influence of cinema begins and where it stops. Right from our childhood, cinema dominates our consciousness. In the words of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, cinema “doesn’t give you what you desire - it tells you how to desire.” Cinema teaches us many things. Among other things, we learn about the medium of cinema and language of cinema without being formally trained about it (Lim, 2007).

Women in Films

Films on women cater mostly to women and revolve around the stories- triumphs, trials, exploitation and empowerment of women. Subjects often include narratives on the domestic front, motherhood, and the sacrifices of a woman. These films perhaps were first made in the 1930s but eventually gained popularity in the 1940s. George Cukor, Douglas Sirk, Max Ophüls, and Josef von Sternberg are synonymous with Hollywood films on women. Movies on women categorised into Chick flicks, Girlfriend Flicks, and Female buddy films.

Talking about Indian films, perhaps the first ground-breaking woman film was *Mother India* (1957) followed by other popular ones like *Aandhi* (1957), *Bhumika* (1977), *Arth* (1982) and *Mirch Masala* (1987).

CONCEPTUALISING SHORT FILMS

A short film defined as a motion picture that is of a duration not long enough to be categorized as a feature film. When world cinema began in the west, it was generally short running for a minute or two. It was not until the 1910s that films started to get longer – about ten minutes. It was only in the 1930s that cinema began to be longer. Indian movies during their inception were longer than their western counterparts. A short film in India is, therefore, a comparatively new genre compared to the world of the west (Zampetakis, Lerakis, Kafetsios & Moustakis, 2015).

The evolution of short films is a recent phenomenon. The genre of short films took the portrayal of women to another level altogether. Bold themes like menstruation, unconventional switching of gender-roles, a woman discussing her sexuality, the role of a woman in a relationship began to be broached openly in short films. The analysis of short films like *Juice*, *Her First Time*, *The Day After Everyday*,

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