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Women Journalists in Hindi Films: Stereotyping the stereotypes

By Saswat Pattanayak

Literature Review:

Not just the films themselves, the writings on the portrayal of women in popular Hindi films have too, long been dictated by assigning extremes—the woman's prerogatives to belong to a side, of the evil or the virtuous, the vamp or the Madonna.

Most authorship have evolved with historical representation of women in Bollywood to lead a discourse on the idealized women figures. Virdi (2003) justifies most studies as the "necessary first step" for providing a rich and abundant characterization of the idealized women figures: passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional, and resilient. And then, in her own work, she goes no further than the "first step", by limiting to content-analysis of three films to study the women representation.

Hindi cinema has been a major point of reference for Indian culture in this century. It has shaped and expressed the changing scenarios of modern India to an extent that no preceding art form could ever achieve.

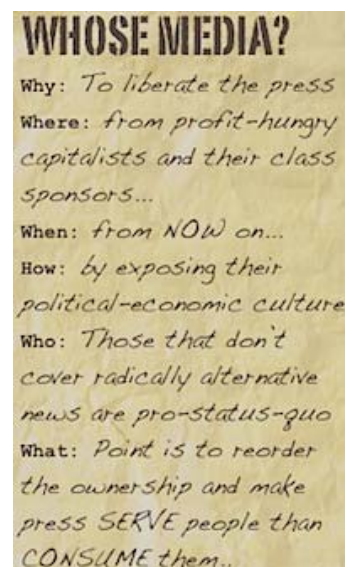
And yet, the diversity in roles that women play is not aptly brought to examination either by the post colonial discourses or the film studies intelligentsia. Gopalan (2000) leads discussion on the avenging women in Indian cinema. She argues that discussions of violence have to consider how films replete with avenging women, gangsters, brutal police force and vigilante closures stage some of the most volatile struggles over representations that shape the public and private fantasies of national, communal, regional and sexual identities.

Moreover, feminist discourses often have employed metaphors of space (containment, captivity, and immobility) to describe gendered oppression in the sphere of the private and the domestic. In these discourses, the space away from home (either nature or the public sector of labor) functions as the space of liberation.

Researchers have worked on the thesis that it was no coincidence that the first Indian film was 'mythological'. There is a scarcity of literature dwelling upon portrayal of the working women in



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films. In her essay, "The Woman: Vamp or Victim", Vasudev (1983) argues that the working woman has suffered an ignominious fate. "The 'modern' girl is either defeated or made to reform, having been brought to see the effort of her ways. Everything is idealized, romanticized, sentimentalized. Women are seldom shown capable of rational, logical thought or action."

There is an elaborate discussion of one female journalist character by Bagchi (1996). However he steers the idea towards sexism in the Indian films and deliberates on portrayal of women as physical objects. "Roma's body language is the other thing which is supposed to depict her as a 'liberated' woman. In all her encounters with Amar she is shown to be sexually aggressive. (Bagchi, 1996). Roma (Raveena Tandon) is a journalist for 'Samadhan' (meaning solution) in the blockbuster Mohra (1994). Despite the fact that the journalist in her seeks the truths out and eventually is victorious in her purpose, the discourses centering her portrayals have only focused on her "sex appeal". "The Changing Face of the Hindi Film Heroine", by Motwani (1996) also trivializes the role of journalist that Raveena plays and focuses instead on "... [the] traditional exhibitionist role [in which] women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearances coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness."

Dearth of researches focusing on the professional woman in the movies appears more plausible for the critical school with an eye on the historical evolution of Hindi films. Prior to independence, the woman was deemed neglected with British imperialism and Indian nationalists, both treading the line of patriarchy. Subsequently one section of the Indian nationalists also grew to be more radical and right-wing and traditionally held forte in the state of Maharashtra, home to Bombay.

Naturally enough, the film industry has predominantly been managed by men. On the other hand, media critics and film theorists have a common enemy: the film industry fraternity. Portrayal of women in Indian cinema has been a favorite theme. To make the most of it, hence, the criticisms have revolved around character assessments, than actual works being carried out by the character. Hence a film like "Mother India" (1957) where, after her husband escapes from the reality of apprehended starvation, the protagonist is a woman who works hard to successfully raise a large family, is often reduced to a movie about social stereotypes. The film is often rejected as politically incorrect by 90's feminists, because of its overt stress on the "love for husband" and "duties" of a mother (allegorically Mother India). What gets missed is the fact that this woman shoots her most beloved son dead when he fails to 'respect women'.

Romanticization does not end with film-making alone. Perpetuation has occurred with texts and analysis of subtexts by scholars trying to carve out an argument. There are some elements of truth in criticisms of "character"-a purely subjective analysis from the outside, often by Diaspora writers, where strikingly and unjustifiably amiss is judicious stress on the "content". More often than not, character-analysis are done out of context, one, without an eye for the times during which the films have been made and two, sans attributing noticeable credits to the 'work' that a woman character performs.

Hence, although there have been dozens of well-made films on women as journalists, there has been almost no discussions on how they have worked as scribes, under what working conditions, the political-economy of situation and the probable systematic exploitation. It is assumed, unfortunately by the media scholars, both western and homegrown, that a woman journalist cannot indulge in romantic behavior! And if the female investigative journalist does



dance in the rain and around the woods, it presupposes sexist overtones and minimalization of her works is reduced to a point where its deemed unworthy for deliberation.

For me, the primary texts have been the films themselves, to see the facets of works and trivialization that women as journalists have portrayed in the Bollywood films. There are also changing scenarios where female journalists in real life are making films or enacting as journalists in movies. Sushmita Sen was a regular columnist for a Bengali newspaper before being crowned Miss Universe (1994) and then became an actress portraying working journalist. She played an investigative journalist in Zor (1998) and carried it with élan. Reema Sen, as aspiring journalist, now is leading character and protagonist as an investigative journalist in News (2004).



Ananya Chatterji-Chakraborty, a journalist and social activist has released “Dwitiya Paksha”, produced by the Films Division, Government of India. Gurinder Chadha is also a journalist-turned-filmmaker, having directed very successfully Bend it like Beckham (2002) and Bride and Prejudice (2004).

Bridging the gap between the real and the reel are the films themselves which speak of the substantive roles Indian actresses have performed as journalists. Page 3 by Madhur Bhandarkar stars Konkan Sengupta who says she wanted to be a journalist. “I wanted to assist my mother in her next directorial venture, and then I wanted to become a journalist. Later when I grew up, I realized that it's a tough job to be a journalist. Then my director, Madhur and producer, Bobby took me to the press offices and showed me around, and I saw how a newspaper office functions. I also met a couple of journalists to get some tips to help me prepare for my role.” Page 3 (2003) features the hollow lives of socialites. Konkan plays a journalist from Mumbai who meets these socialites and interacts with them.

In a more serious movie dealing with social theme of gender injustices, Jagmohan Mundra's Bawander (2001), stars Nandita Das. Laila Rousseau plays the English journalist and Rahul Khanna is her interpreter and sometimes lover. They make the journey to Rajasthan in the present time to research the story of Saanwari Devi (the female protagonist).

Shararat directed by Gurudev Bhalla stars Hrishita Bhatt, a young aspiring journalist, who follows Abhishek Bachchan to the old age home to document his transformation. She also gets to like him, as she gets to know him better. It's a lighthearted, emotional film that deals with the importance of a family and keeping it together.

In recent blockbuster, Lakshya, Preity Zinta plays television journalist Romila Dutta, a character supposedly modelled on well-known NDTV journalist Barkha Dutt. Zinta has quite a good role and a good deal of footage in the film, and she does a fairly decent job of it without ever being spectacular.

Teen Deewarein directed by Nagesh Kukunoor, is a serious film taking life-story approach to talk about three prisoners and their past and present life told by a lady journalist played by prominent actress Juhi Chawla.

In *Mumbai Matinee* (2003), Perizaad Zorabian, a female actress is portrayed as an investigative journalist who wants to interview the main character who to her bad luck, gets arrested, before finally succeeding.

There are scores of other films belonging to different genres and ages, three of which will become subjects for my primary studies in this paper. Notwithstanding the stereotypes largely prevailing in the films themselves, I will also highlight how the stereotypes themselves have been stereotyped in subsequent reviews, often undermining the diverse representations and other times, being trenchantly dismissive about it.

Notes:

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2. Amitabh Bagchi, *Women in Indian Cinema*, <http://www.cs.jhu.edu/~bagchi/women.html>, 1996
3. Ravi Vasudevan (eds.) *Making Meaning of Indian Cinema*, Oxford University Press, 2000
4. Desai, Jigna, *Beyond Bollywood*, Routledge, 2004
5. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (eds.) *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, Vikas Publishing House, 1983
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