BOLLYWOOD AND WOMEN: How an element of pop-culture keeps VAWG alive

By

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CONCEPT PAPER

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the depiction of women in cinema and the role it plays in reinforcing gender stereotypes and formulaic thinking. It also aims to analyze the negotiatory relationship the audience shares with the content that they are exposed to as active receptors of the text. Further, this paper investigates the nature of screen presence of female characters and questions the space provided to them as nurturers, trophy wives and restorers of morality.
In Bollywood, the Indian popular film industry, the comedy movies can largely be characterized by their skillfully choreographed item numbers, catchy and aesthetically beautiful, exotic sets. The sensational plots feature characters which pull off bawdy humor with ease. The plot line generally follows the male lead through his journey to win his lady love, who is the object of his desire ever since her introduction in the film, which ensues humorous circumstances. The actresses with perfectly sculpted bodies have little role in the progression of the plot as they serve the purpose of an object of male desire which is won as a trophy wife by the end of the climax. ¹

According to the Active Audience Reception Theory, audiences are actively involved, (consciously or unconsciously), in making sense of any given message communicated to them through media, by relating it to their own personal contexts and cultural backgrounds. The portrayal of women as sex objects has far-reaching ramifications when applied to the conservative cultural realities of India. The fact that cinema is not merely an extension of reality becomes problematic in this context. It leads to the polarization in the understanding of female identities by the average movie goer who reductively categorizes women between the sanskaari beti (culturally disciplined daughter) and the item girl. (Items girls, in Indian film industry are associated with loose moral grounds and excessive sexuality.)

It is difficult for the audience to distinguish the cinematographic sanskari beti and the item girl from the everyday independent Indian woman as these movies are largely unrelatable to the average moviegoer. According to a Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, media affects people’s lives by shaping their opinions, attitudes and beliefs.² For most Indian men, social interactions with the opposite sex are severely limited (only 30% amongst them live in urban areas). Cinema guides much of their perceptions of women and gives rise to disrespectful attitudes towards them, as women are viewed as beings whose untameable sexuality has to be controlled in order to stop them from becoming the item they see in movies.³ It widens the gap between virtual reality and physical reality leading to the reinforcement of the need of subjugation of women on one level, and the perpetration of patriarchy on another.

For inspecting the role and portrayal of women in cinema (bollywood, in particular) I shall critically examine one blockbuster comedy movie and two hit pop songs, as my case studies, that have gained wide acceptance amongst the ‘conservative’ Indian audience.

My first case study examines the substance to women characters in comedy movies, beyond the glamour quotient which they add to the movie. Housefull 3 revolves around a father who doesn’t want his three daughters, Ganga, Jamuna and Saraswati (Names are meant to be metaphorical as they represent sanctity ¹

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¹ Even though the above mentioned formula sounds like an over simplification of the entire genre in the industry, it proves to be true so much so that most of the movies which have used this formula have turned out to be hits amongst the audience. This shall be discussed in detail through my case studies, later in this paper.

² Case study: Analysis of the gender stereotyping phenomenon in TV commercials by Malgorzata Wolska

³ The discussion in this paragraph is a part of the Forbes report titled How Bollywood Is Failing The Women Of India, by Ruchika Tulshyan
and holiness in Indian mythical tradition) to get married. Now it’s up to the three men, Sandy aka Sundi, Bunty and Teddy to try to and convince the father that they're a good fit for his daughters.4

The rich Gujarati father Batuk Patel who lives in his lavish mansion in London is proud of his daughters, not because one of them happens to be a doctor, another works with an organization for the differently-abled and a third does something at a wax museum, but because they are very sanskaari. The names of his daughters are a physical manifestation of their sanskaars which are palpable as they pretend to sleep early and wear salwars, the Indian traditional outfit which covers full legs (for precisely one scene in the film); otherwise they are seen flaunting their attractive bodies in a silly, giggly manner.

The humor in the film is bawdy in nature as it is generated at the expense of female sexuality. There’s a scene in the movie where Akshay’s character, Sandy, who is a rapper calls his girlfriend ‘Doodh ki Katori’. There is also an extensive soundtrack performed by him titled as “Teri maa behen, maa behen, maa behen, maa behen…” 5 We also come across feeble acts of redemption towards the end of the movie where the three sisters act as restorers of morality for all the lead characters by apologizing for their wrong acts, of role playing and ridiculing of the disabled, in the Church.

The audience at a theater in Rajasthan6 were seen eliciting responses such as clapping, wolf whistling, calling out jokes in the cinema hall, accompanied by laughter, during the course of the movie. The generation of such enthusiastic responses from the audience makes sure that the demand and supply cycle of the production of similar movies is maintained, where the audience is fed with gender biased storylines to perpetuate male hegemony amongst the masses, in order to maximize profits at the box office.

My second case study is an item number featuring popular film actress Kareena Kapoor Khan. During the course of the song, we see her dancing to misogynistic and suggestive lyrics wearing scanty but indianised clothes. Her screen presence in the movie is confined to the item number and she is seen adding glamour to the screen.

Here is an excerpt from the song:

Main to tanduri main to tanduri murgi hoon yaar;
Gatkale saiyan alcohol se

(I am a roasted chicken; gulp me down with alcohol, hubby)

Under the ambit of the term entertainment, what we generally encounter is a continuous screen presence of attractive actresses on screen, with relatively lesser influence on the plot. However, they are directly adding to the glamour quotient of the movie by grooving to songs with. This might seem like an oversimplification of the Bollywood pop culture but it is evident that the objectification of women has found easy acceptance in the minds of the viewers, so much so that when influential women like Kareena

4 Synopsis taken from IMDb

5 As discussed in The Hindu’s review of Housefull 3 by Namrata Joshi, titled Housefull 3 review: Humor of the Worst Kind.

6 As observed by me while watching the movie at Gold Cinema in Alwar, Rajasthan.
Kapoor dance to such lyrics; it does not make the viewer feel uncomfortable, rather it becomes a nationwide hit enjoyed by all played at all leading clubs and wedding parties.

Songs are being made which not only glorify stalking but also tend to normalize the idea of male dominance via eve teasing and chasing; reiterating the societal dogma that women possess little or no agency to take a decision in this scenario, other than to accept her stalker as her lover.

Here is a stanza from Shahid Kapoor and Ileana D'Cruz starrer, *Phata poster Nikla Hero* which endorses similar ideas:

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Khali peeli khali peeli rokne ka nai,
Tera peecha karoon toh tokne ka nai
Hai tujhpe right mera, tu hai delight mera
Tera rasta jo roku, chaukne ka nahin
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Through these lyrics, we see the dominant hegemonic ideology being reinforced by an institutionalization of male dominance over women. When influential actors become a part of such portrayal, they not only encourage eve teasing and stalking amongst their fans who hero worship them, but also create a certain image of reality by showing women as subservient beings with inherently less autonomy. Resultantly, the reflection of a real world is incomplete and distorted. So the concern should be to break this cycle of supply and demand of such cinema which strengthens the hegemonic ideas of the dominating class. Change in the mindsets of the people that we lobby for has to be two-sided and not just an attempt on part of the film industry, for supply exists because of the demand which in turn is shaped by the existing supply.