



Reconsidering Feminism in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

This study argues that feminist and gender theories have not helped Indian filmmakers to represent women as human beings as expected, but rather they urged more exposure of the female body to be exploited for propagating movies and entertaining the male gaze. Gender and feminist theorists call for celebrating the female body and this makes a great difference between sexualizing females in movies earlier and in nowadays. This studies uses a psychoanalysis in treating feminist and media theories while dealing with two sequel movies that are used as the case study of this work and which are Heropanti (2014) and Heropanti (2022).

Keywords: stereotype - representation – sexualization – male gaze – exploitation

Introduction

Women in Bollywood movies have been represented in many ways as we cannot overgeneralize one or two or even ten repeated representations of women in ten movies as an example and this is because women in India are not a homogenous entity as they belong to different cultures and religions and each culture has a certain unique treatment of women. However, in this study, our focus is not on the identity of the Indian woman, but this study's, main argument is whether women in Indian movies have been treated and reflected differently from their representation in previous stages of history in the issue of sexualizing their bodies and eroticizing males through producing women as objects of eroticism or are dealt with normally as human being which is the main aim of gender and feminist revolutions that took place recently in a heavy manner.

Undoubtedly, studying the representation of women in different disciplines of knowledge occupies the bulk of feminists' attention .Since the beginning of feminism as a political movement , feminists' studies have paid a great deal of attention to explore the representation of women in the literary canon. This , however , was the first step toward recovering the female history that has been buried and hidden for a long period of time .Bing solely dominated and written by men alone, the literary canon depicted women as naïve , submissive and lacking reason .In other words , women were misrepresented if represented at all. This literary canon is a

discipline among many others that seeks to misrepresent women and portray them in a negative way. "Women hidden from history " and "The lost Female tradition " are some of the terms coined by some feminists who establish these assumptions on the basis of their findings of having studied male literature across history . These works paved the ground for women to have a literature of their own. (Elien: 1995: 15)

Equally important is the representation of women in media. Nowadays the evolution in the global feminists' concern to study the images of women in media is due to the significance of the latter which plays a paramount roles in educating and shaping the personalities of both sexes . In this globalized era , media stands unique . It is the medium which people of different ages and classes deal with on a daily basis. Since our early childhood, we are exposed to different images of men and women. However, very few are those who realize and understand the ideologies loaded on a piece of media work. In fact, media is value-laden. A careful analysis of the types of women's images will show how media seeks to perpetuate the society's stereotypical images about women.

In fact, the previous lines are applicable to the representation of women in any culture and cinema producing company and any time. Film makers cannot avoid attracting the spectators predicted canonical norms in treating women men relationships, desires, and thoughts about each other. Theories of feminism and gender might work well in giving women rights of work and mobility, though restricted and likely to have troubles, but they cannot change innate and biological differences and straight thoughts of the lack for the second sex. Cinema can not but perpetuate this idea even if feminists' pressure on filmmakers continues to increase.

This studies argues that the India cinema might have given more roles for women in movies, increased some of their jobs, behaviour, mobility and so on, but they could not but produce women as targets of the male gaze. This study uses two movies which are sequel produced in two different times and produced and written by the same people. *Heropanti (2014)* and *Heropanti II (2022)* are the case study of this work. The choice of sequel films is to show the differences between the representation of women in both films and what kind of influence took place in the writer, director and producers minds and which appear through any changes in women portrayals in the second movie which is very newly produced. There seems to be no influence on gender and feminism theories on the representation of women in Indian cinema except in the dress transformation in casual daily life clothes, work and mobility. But women portrayal as a docile but seductive body is still prevailing if not really enhanced and encouraged.

Theoretical Review

To what extent Indian women got use of the feminist and gender theories especially in the new era? Can we say that women really got the benefit of the aims of feminist theories to be seen as human beings rather than just bodies created for the attraction of man's eyes and mere inferior sex that is made for serving men at homes even if women themselves have got the chance or rather allowed by men to work outside. Factually, the role of women might have changed in the new modern era especially when we talk about mobility and opportunities of jobs regardless of the decision-making positions which are thoroughly controlled by men.

Nevertheless, a woman is still represented as a body objectified for the male gaze whatever producers try to use of the modern theories of feminism and gender. Women in media are used mainly for advertising products, touristic places and sometimes they are no more than beauties offered for the enjoyment of man's eyes.

In an article entitled "Analyzing Portrayal of women in Bollywood Cinema"(2021) Ayushi G. introduces the article by arguing that if film-makers have taken feminists' thoughts into consideration in their recent productions or no. Ayushi states that women earlier were "were being patronized in a manner that the victim wife refuses to leave her husband's house despite severe physical and emotional violence and rationale of leaving the marital house only at the time of her death." She focuses on certain issues concerning women's rights in work and mobility and whether are given opportunities to have important roles in cinema as actors or as participators in film-making.

Over the time roles however have changed, from being dependent on their male counterparts to very independently carrying the storyline forward. There is a fundamental transformation in role of women in modern India with the gradual change in the perception of women in society and made great progresses towards equality in role in movies in recent decades. (Ibid)

Ayushi makes no notice of how women are seen as bodies for entertainment though she repeats the word 'entertainment' many times, but her study does not reflect the crucial dilemma which is mostly universal; women are sensually portrayed and this stereotype is reconfirmed even in the most current production in the Indian cinema. Ayushi concludes her study by stating that

With this study, I want to conclude that now woman is more-stronger, self-independent, open minded, educated and leader. This study will be useful for future studies to depict role of women in 20th century. Now, we can say women are getting equal right as male actors are getting and bolder to keep their demand of role. (Ibid)

In fact, Ayushi's big title shows a great interest in the representation and misrepresentation of women which attracts the attention of any critique who wants to see what kind of transformation women have got after the several works and theories of feminists. The only result is that women have been given some jobs and got the chance of being educated. But, does this help in making the society forget the patriarchal stereotypical images? Women whether educated or not, having jobs or no, housewives or even ministers are misrepresented as bodies whose main job in media and cinema in particular is to eroticize man's sensual desire towards the female body and movement. Vatika Sibal in "Stereotyping Women in Indian Cinema" (2018) illustrates the issue of deliberate confirmation of misrepresenting women as docile erotic bodies by stating that

while films from the earlier era showed women as extremely submissive and docile, recent releases like *Rockstar (2011)* have resorted to heroines who are bold, uninhibited, skimpily clad, and promiscuous. This ultimately does not lead to the empowerment of the women character; it only reduces her to a prop to satisfy the male audience. The female body, the male gaze, voyeurism – all of which popular cinema relies on are present in these item numbers. They are only an addition to the package of entertainment that the movie is supposed to provide. (Researchgate Cited on 10-10-2022)

Perpetuating The Male Gaze Through Modern Cinematic Production

It is not easy for a woman to forget that she is female because her body always reminds her that she should celebrate her femininity neither it is easy for a man to forget his masculine desires. This is seen by feminist as absurd and they believe in what De Beauvoir states in her *The Second Sex (1973)*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (301) and in later section of her book she shows that creating of a woman starts when the doctor says after a birth of a baby the 'she is a girl', which is very perplexing as the biological difference is what leads then doctor declares whether the new born baby s/hould be denoted by the pronoun 'she' or 'he'. Becoming a woman should never been seen as problematic but making her an object for entertaining the male sensual desires is the real problem.

Cinema in all countries and not just in Indian Movies presents women as eroticizing even after the widespread feminist and gender theories that have participated in making women proud of exposing more of their bodies which is innately, normally and culturally eroticizing for both males and also females because of the radical attempts of creating the homosexual desires amongst the same sex. Judith Butler almost becomes more radical than De Beauvoir in her books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990)*, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (1993)*, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (1997)* *Undoing Gender (2004)*, which focus on the formation of body performance. Influenced by Michael Foucault, she believes it is culture and previous construction of thoughts that creates sexual desires to the other sex.

Consequently, such radical theories led to many waves of homosexual outbreaks around the world because of the believe that 'sexuality is constructed' is never innate. So, the problem of bodies and desires is very challenging for those feminists whose last mission in dealing with bodies is encouraging cultures of gays and lesbians. Biological differences are found and the need for the second sex is universal and innate even if some rare people tried to make gender surgical transformation from a sex to another. It can never be a norm. This really makes the job of feminists frustrating because of two main reasons:

1- It is not easy for women and men to forget the biological formation and their desire to each other is natural and mostly can be judged as innate in all cultures. So, gender radical theories try to oppose something can not be avoided. So, it is natural to say that women are females and men are males. Difference is found but it should never be seen as deficiency in one of both sexes. Both are created to suit each other and help each other as

human beings. The only problem lies in inferiorizing women and making them subjugated to patriarchy and man's enjoyment only and this is always enforced by media producers all the time and in all media means.

2- Radical theories makes the same differentiation between males and females and mostly they same the same problem by trying to negate man's existence and by attempts to revenge from the patriarchal system that has been rooted for centuries throughout history. Rewriting history from a feminist perspective is not that easy task because it would bring a new movement of conflict between male prejudice and female pride. Some feminists, specially Orientals, as Nawal Sadawi believe that women should celebrate their femineity and Simon de Beauvoir urges feminists to be proud of their bodies while Judith Butler calls for homosexuality as to create a new zone for women to satisfy their desires away from the 'second sex'. De Beauvoir explains that "in itself, homosexuality is as limiting as heterosexuality: the ideal should be to be capable of loving a woman or a man; either, a human being, without feeling fear, restraint, or obligation."(Ibid)

In this case, such radical theories make nothing except perpetuating and confirming the linear between men and women which might work for some feminists, but it would never be a fact. Some homosexuals scatter here and there can create such separating atmosphere by the help of human rights and some organizations, but it can never succeed in creating a true universal culture. Women can be proud of their bodies of course and this is not a big problem for those who encourage men to respect women as human beings.

In fact, this study does believe that some gender and feminists' theories work against women real pride of their femininity. At the time women bodies were once seen as holy and should be covered because of the prevailing belief that clothes work as a shield against the male gaze, radical feminists urge to uncover that shield using the pretext of celebrating bodies and freedom. Women are not fragile because of protecting their bodies from the male gazes, but they are fragile because of treating them just as bodies for enjoyment.

In her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey makes a comparison between the male who is active and able to gaze and the female passivity which is being looked at. Laura thinks the female character receives looks from two sources: a look from the audience and a look from the male characters while doing the film. The two distinct modes of looking at the woman, according to Mulvey, are either voyeuristic or fetishistic looks that she presents in Freudian terms as 'male castration anxiety'. She states that women are used in the film as sexual objects and as a way of temptation to encourage as many viewers for the film as possible. It is the man, she thinks, who controls the action progress and the one who leads the movement of the film towards the end. He is the bearer of the look and the representative of power in the film. The female presence in the film is deliberately made to serve the man who appears as hero building his victory at the cost of his female counterpart. The female appearance, on the other hand, makes the audience miss the main events involving them in an act of voyeurism rather than enjoying the excitement caused by the film story.

When presenting this argument from psychoanalytical point of view, one would say that the woman represents the unconscious of the male(both as actor and spectator) because she is always the object he is looking at and never is able to speak for herself. Her lack of a penis implies a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety. He does that by

preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma and secondly by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.

One would say that Laura Mulvey' article has both advantages and disadvantages. It is useful in the sense it contributes to the understanding of patriarchal thoughts and ideologies that are dominant not only in the day-to-day life events but also in important works such as films and media production. Like men's production of texts and novels, films continue to deal with women as sexual objects. Another feature of this article is that it suggests a new trend and direction of thinking about cinema away from the traditional ones. The shortcoming of this article, on the other hand, lies on the idea of using psychoanalysis itself. Freud and his psychoanalytical approach does not serve the goal of feminism due to his misconception about women who are looked upon by him as ones lacking penis, a thing which, according to him, renders them weak and submissive. As a result, using psychoanalysis does not represent a move from patriarchal culture, but instead fosters women subordination and passivity.

Female Visual Seduction Enhanced

Regardless of dialogues and male control of all the events in both movies, what we are concerned with in this study is how female body is treated with in both movies. This of course depends on visual representation more than the reaction of the male gaze and what kind of words are produced as a response of the female seductive exposition of the female body. Let us first compare the two theater posters that were used to advertise both movie bearing in mind the duration between both movies exceeds seven years.



It is clear for any spectator that both posters present enough details about who is going to control all the events in both movies and what each of the character is going to offer for the enjoyment of the spectator. Most spectators like action and romance because it is power and beauty, strength and seduction that moves the spectator to watch and enjoy movies. Through a general look at spectators' reviews on both movies, the story seems normal and has no real attraction without the action and romance offered in both movies. The character of Bablu in both posters as well as in both movies resembles power and the wise mind. He is the super hero that can defend and protect innocent people especially the weak fragile heroins in both movies.

In most of the Indian movies, the male hero should have a strong healthy body, a wise mind and of course a strong but kind heart. This of course makes no flue in the male character because mostly female spectators in general like such characteristics in males. Here, the female gaze also can be negotiated as man is objectified. It is not the male as a human being that is exposed, but it is the male physique that is targeted when dealing with the female gaze. However, male bodies are not always focused on except when introducing the male hero or when he is in a fight scene especially when he is supposed to tear off or take off his shirt to show his muscles. So, masculinity is also exposed in both movies but not as something to be a shamed of because it motivate men's power and pride.

In both posters, Inaaya and Dimpy Chaudhary, the female characters shown in the two images offer some other kind of power which is soft and seductive, the power of tenderness and beauty. But as we are concerned with what difference feminist theories have brought to filmmakers for the last seven years which is the interval period between the two productions. What is shown in the two postcards iconize what is really seen in both movies. Regardless of man's control and women fragility, minority and weakness, the kind of attraction of the male gaze seems to have a better, closer and more exposure to the male gaze. In fact, Indian songs and dance makes it crucial to avoid talking about seduction in most of the Indian movies that have been produced. Nearly, all the movies that any spectator has watched must have more than one song accompanied by many zooms in and close shots of women half nude bodies and seductive eye looks or thirsty lips. And with the new modern clothes that have come due to the trans-gendering and feminists' shout for celebrating a woman's body, clothes have become shorter and seduction has become normal under the pretext of modernizing customs.

Feminist's theories might brought some voice for women to speak, but really they brought more chance for cinema to propagate and exploit their bodies. An online site, The Hindu presents talks about some study made by U.N. scholars stating that :

Indian films, the study finds, have a significantly higher prevalence of sexualisation of women characters and the movies score low in depicting women in significant speaking roles. While women represent nearly half of the world's population, less than one third of all speaking characters in films are women and U.K.-U.S. collaborations and Indian films are at the bottom of the pack.(U.N.)

The two movies of Heropanti one and two are not full of female objectification scenes because our concern is not to criticize sexualizing females in Indian movies. This study just tries to show that feminist's theories have brought more exposer to the male gaze by exposing more and mor parts of the female bodies in movies which can create a culture full of half nude women especially among the Indian teens. They simply have participated in creating another gaze which is women gaze to women bodies. This is of course is added to the third gaze which is the camera gaze which is more dangerous in creating more gazes to female bodies because of the techniques of focus and zooming and helping spectators to enjoy more eroticism on women bodies than they can see in reality.

Conclusion

Feminism might have helped in empowering women's mobility and work. It also might have giving voice to women in society, but unfortunately, it helped in objectifying the female body in cinema as well as in reality. The thoughts of modernization and globalization or rather Westernization have brought along with an alteration of the female traditional Indian clothes with partially nude clothes and more daring close ups and zoom ins as a way of more exploitation of women bodies in the Indian cinema. Women are represented as objects to be enjoyed by gazing at their eroticizing bodies that are deliberately exposed in modern movies more than they were in previous years.

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