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WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN CINEMA: A STUDY OF AGATHA CHRISTIE'S ADAPTATIONS.

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Abstract: Cinema is a world where reality disguises into fiction and presents itself in great grandeur. Like literature, cinema too mirrors society. It's a powerful channel that possesses potential to induce significant transformation in people's perspectives. Cinema shelters diverse depictions of various sections of society. Gender representations in Indian movies have had an interesting history. Women, a vital part of this society have journeyed from being presented as dependent and docile, to empowered and determined. Initially, our films did not focus their attention on women, depicting them as meek and secondary characters always in need of a hero, reflecting much the social condition of women in twentieth-century India. The scenario now is different, as we have many women-centric films emphasizing on issues relating to women. Indian cinema is indebted to Agatha Christie, the most celebrated writer of detective fiction for her influential novels that inspired adaptations in thriller/mystery genre.

This paper seeks to analyze three Indian films namely '*Gumnaam*', '*Dhund*' and '*Shubho Mohorot*' (Bengali) which are based on Agatha Christie's novels, with respect to their characterization of women roles. Woman playing an intelligent detective, or a prime suspect are distinctive roles that redefine gender representation in movies. It also intends to reflect how these female characters were elemental in breaking stereotypes about gender.

Key Words: Gender, Detective, Agatha Christie, Stereotype, Cinema.

INTRODUCTION

The nexus between women and their representation in Indian cinema has been a debatable one. On one hand we notice progressive and challenging roles depicted by talented actresses whereas some movie continue to portray women in the same old traditional damsel in distress kind of roles. Women, in general have always been subjected to inferior treatment in many vocations. It is only recently that modernization has propelled change in regard to the condition of women. Feminist movements and social developments have assisted women in discovering their significant status and role in the society.

Gender, a socially constructed entity has not only encouraged discrimination, but also seized from women the opportunity to perform equally with men. Women are attributed to menial, domestic and ordinary work that defines their gender roles. But this performing of gender roles is into criticism and has led to the question, the very existence of gender as a basis for determining one's actions. The twenty-first century women is fortunate to have found her freedom, though not entirely, as most of the women are able to share prestigious positions equivalent to men. Though there still exists a glass ceiling and gender disparity, women are competent and are fighting towards a more progressive future.

Cinema, is an integral part of the entertainment industry. Movies and society borrow from each other. There exists an equally proportional relationship between movies and society because movies are a reflection of society's happenings and individuals are in turn influenced by movies. Cinema is a mode of expression that also forms perspectives of people. They are also an agent of social change. Movies not only provide entertainment but also bring out social issues that require attention. Both men and women have contributed to this field but men have always held an upper hand and attained more celebrated status. The "hero" in the movies are glorified and also given the prominent roles. The heroine on the other is like a supporting actor that only exists to serve the purpose of the hero's actions. Budd Boetticher, an American film director rightly reflects what movies in the earlier times depicted through these words:

"What counts is what the heroine provokes or rather what she represents. She is the one or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself, the woman has not the slightest importance"

The Indian cinema too represented similar kind of women roles, but recently times have changed, giving way to an era wherein women are no longer the dependent beings that they used to be. Actresses now are taking up roles that redefine gender roles. They prefer roles that are strong, courageous and have a mind of their own. With films like 'Kahani' 'English Vinglish' 'Queen' 'Piku' 'Angry Indian Goddesses' and many others, the women have arrived and how. They are no longer the pillion riders in need of somebody, they carry the movie on their shoulders and also make it successful. There is always a phase through history that composes of some movements, events ideas or individuals that are much ahead of their time. The pioneers of these kind of movies were of course the women in the 1970's who attempted roles that challenged stereotype depiction of the heroine. Many movies of those times had actresses playing strong and significant roles. Thus we will now be examining certain Indian movies that portrayed women as influential, determined and intelligent beings.

Many movies are often influenced by novels. Indian movies are no exception. Agatha Christie, the queen of crime and her novels have been inspiring movie makers since a long time. Her novels depicted powerful women characters that escalated beyond gender roles. The three movies that we will analyze in this paper are adaptations of Agatha Christie's novels.

THE WOMEN DETECTIVE:

"*Shubho Maharat*" is a Bengali movie based on Agatha Christie's novel '*The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side*'. This movie is a murder mystery that surprised the audiences and earned the praise of film critics. This women-centric movie is a classic example of breaking stereotype characterization of women in movies. The film stars three women in lead roles. Nandita Das, Rakhee Gulzar and Sharmila Tagore who are the perfect cast for an exceptional movie as this. The story revolves around the murder of an actress (Kalyani Mandal) on the sets of her first film. The police investigation begins and the husband is suspected to be the killer as he is allegedly having an affair. But later we come to know that an NRI producer (Sharmila Tagore) is also an actress who held grudges against this actress because she had spread a contagious disease, which led to the birth of an abnormal child of the producer. Thus she poisons the juice that the actress drinks and dies.

The first prominent character in this movie is the Journalist Played by Nandita Das. She is an intelligent, aspiring woman who finds herself in this chaotic situation. She was the only person present during the actresses' death. She uses her grey matter and provides inputs to her aunt about the murder. A woman character who is smart, independent and assists in investigating a crime is not very often noticed in Indian cinemas. Her character is like a breath of fresh air.

Another very appealing and powerful character in this movie, is of the NRI producer played by Sharmila Tagore. A woman killer, this in itself is the most striking aspect of this movie. Indian movies always focused on showing women as obedient housewives or love interests of the male lead. Characters driven by gender roles were used to portray women in positive and secondary roles. Negative characters were always played by the males in the movie. But this movie broke the stereotype by showing a woman character in a negative role. Here the woman was not an objectified or pleasurable individual but a cunning woman seeking revenge. Thus a character such as this was successful in re-defining the representation of woman in Indian movies.

One of the most interesting characters of this movie is the aunt of the journalist essayed by Rakhee Gulzar. She steps into the shoes of Jane Marple (the most famous female detective created by Agatha Christie) and is a treat to watch. She has done complete justice to her role. Rakhee plays an old woman who is an unofficial detective. She receives inputs from her niece and through her deductive logic and ultimately helps the police crack the case. A female detective character is something that Indian movies have still not explored much. It is only recently that a woman in the role of a police officer are being accepted by the audience but this movie was a pioneer in bringing out such an unusual and fresh characterization to woman roles.

THE COURAGEOUS WOMEN

'*Gumnaam*' released in the year 1965 was a thriller that was a huge box office hit. It was based on the Agatha Christie's novel '*And Then Were None*'. It is a story about eight people who are stranded on an island. How and why they are brought and left there and what happens to each of them is what the film revolves around. Among the eight, two are women. Both these characters are in contrast to each other. When all of them arrive at the island and settle down, a letter is read in which names all of them are mentioned as killers of a rich man. It also states that all of them will meet their death one by one. Nobody takes this seriously and continue their routine. The next day they find the first dead body. Nobody knows who killed him. This

saga continues until only three people are left. In the climax it is revealed that one among them is the killer and he reveals his true identity. He killed them all as they were involved in the conspiracy of murdering a rich man. Another character also reveals that he is an inspector who had come in search of the escaped criminal.

The two women characters in these movies are played by the actresses Helen and Asha. Both of them have acted beautifully and bring out the varied emotions required for the movie in a brilliant manner. The character that draws our attention is of Helen. In the beginning of the story she is shown to be a free, independent woman who uses her charm over men. Her interactions with other characters show her to be a bold lady. She is not hesitant in expressing herself. When everyone is scared and depressed about the murders she is the one to cheer them with her exceptional dancing. She lives life the way she wants too. She too meets her death at the end but the fact that she was also involved in killing of a rich man makes her a negative character. This depicts women did not shy away from choosing roles that had a negative shade. They were ready to experiment with their roles. Thus in this movie Helen plays a character that is not meek or submissive but vigorous and outgoing.

THE FREE SPIRITED WOMEN

Dhund is yet another classic adaptation of Agatha Christie's play *The Unexpected Guest*. This movie features Zeenat Aman, Navin Nischol and Danny Denzogna in the lead roles. The story revolves around the murder mystery of a man. When on a misty night, a stranger breaks into a house for help, he finds a woman holding a gun, standing in front of a dead body. The woman reveals that she has killed her husband as he was a cruel man, who tortured her. The murder was the result of a fight that broke out between the two. Sympathizing with the woman the stranger decides to help her. They fake a robbery and present as if the murder was committed by an outsider. The police arrive and as the investigation goes on. Another man who is a friend of the murdered man is tried at court. Finally the stranger appears in the court and confesses that he is the real culprit and committed the murder. The stranger reveals that the man whom he killed had raped his lover when he was away and destroyed her life.

The character of Zeenat is central to the plot. At the beginning of the story she is innocent and under the control of her husband, enduring his cruelty. But later, she finds love in another man who is kind and

loving towards her. She does not resist her feelings for him. Even though, married she finds happiness in another man. When she finds her husband dead she thinks her lover has committed it and takes the blame on herself in order to save him. When the stranger asks her to fake a robbery she easily agrees. All these incidents present to us a woman who did not continue to be in submission but rather chose to do what her heart desired. She is finally free after her husband's death and unites with her lover. A strong willed and also a loving woman is what the character represents.

Feminist Film Critic Laura Mulvey argues 'woman are usually depicted in a passive role that provide visual pleasure' 'they are bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning'. This is true to many of the characters that woman played in most of the films, but all the woman character in these movie were active participants in the plot. They are not in a passive role that provide only visual pleasure rather they are central to the story and provide meaning to it.

Women representation in Indian cinema has been through a roller coaster ride. It is finally now, that the film world is realizing and enacting on the better projection of women in movies. Though there are many disparities in pay scale and other challenges to be met, actresses are proving their metal by choosing different roles. The women-centric movies gaining critical acclaim and performing well at the box office are evidences of a better times for woman in the cinemas.

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