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WHEN HOUSEHUSBAND MEETS WORKING WIFE: WHAT KI AND KA CAN TEACH US ABOUT GENDER ROLES

¹Rosemaria Regy Mathew and ²Dr. S. Balasundari

¹Junior Research Fellow, ²Associate Professor

School of English and Foreign Languages
Gandhigram Rural Institute, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract: The paper makes a critical study of *Ki and Ka*, a movie that seeks to address gender issues in the contemporary context. Through a careful scrutiny of the reversal of gender roles in the film and the relationship of the lead characters, Kia and Kabir, it looks at the lessons the movie gives while also analyzing the limitations in the way it deals with the concept of gender. The paper argues that gender equality in a man-woman relationship can only be achieved by breaking notions of power and with each of the partners complementing the other. Too rigidly structured and arranged spaces for the husband and wife to operate makes it all the more difficult. Ultimately the point is not about the husband or wife dominating the relationship, it is about sharing responsibilities.

Keywords: gender, gender roles, stereotypes, husband, wife, gender equality

The point is not for women simply to take power out of men's hands, since that wouldn't change anything about the world. It's a question precisely of destroying that notion of power. (Simone de Beauvoir)

Introduction

Ki and Ka (2016) is an Indian Hindi romantic comedy film which portrays a young married couple, played by Kareena Kapoor Khan and Arjun Kapoor, who make an effort to go beyond traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Written and directed by R. Balki, the film is a unique attempt at breaking gender stereotypes and the conventional gender roles that the society puts forward for men and women. The movie derives its names from the Hindi language words which refer to a girl and a boy- 'ladki' and 'ladka' respectively, and also from the names of the leading characters (Kia and Kabir). While Arjun Kapoor plays Kabir, the son of a business tycoon and the stay-at-home husband of Kia who enjoys being the 'artist' at home, Kareena Kapoor Khan plays Kia, the career driven ambitious girl who works hard to climb up the corporate ladder. The movie goes on to portray their life together with all its ups and downs, with the couple almost reaching a break-up point towards the end, which is finally resolved to conclude

with a happily-ever-after. *Ki and Ka* is indeed to be well appreciated for the novel concept of envisioning a space where gender roles are reversed and for working out the consequences of such an arrangement. It is also commendable for some of the detours it takes from the usual Bollywood hits.

Performance of Gender Roles

The society has always adopted a rather rigid stand regarding the performance of gender. It has laid out explicit ways of how a girl or a boy should talk, dress, behave etc and such gender codes are internalized unknowingly by children from a young age. “The terms sex roles and gender roles often are used interchangeably to denote a repertoire of emotions, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions that are commonly associated more with one sex than with the other” (Levesque).

The concept of ‘gender roles,’ refers to the “activities ascribed to women and men on the basis of their perceived differences. Gender roles are socially determined, change over time and space and are influenced by social, cultural and environmental factors characterizing a certain society, community or historical period. Gender roles aim at setting boundaries between what is perceived as appropriate for women and for men in the society with regards both to the public and private domains. Such roles are accepted as ‘natural’ and internalized by girls and boys from a very early age, through the gender models they learn through their social environment. (“Gender Roles”)

Blackstone in her article titled “Gender Roles and Society” points out that “gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender. Appropriate gender roles are defined according to a society's beliefs about differences between the sexes” (335). These roles have been ‘constructed’ just as the social constructions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and may vary depending on region, religion, class, national culture, and other social factors. However what is to be noted is the often followed binary paradigm in the positioning of genders and allocating exclusive spaces for the man and woman. More often than not, the space allocated to each (male/female) gender does not merge or share many common intersectional points where they can interact, assimilate and finally do away with the boundaries and distinctions altogether.

Ki and Ka successfully manages to present an idea of reversal of gender roles and works out the consequences of the same in the marital life of Kia and Kabir. Kia, as the movie portrays, is an ambitious career driven woman who is completely comfortable in her skin and who knows what she wants from life. She is clear about her dreams and vocal about her desires, personal and professional. Not only does she see ambitious professional dreams, she also works hard for making them a reality, which she eventually does. Quite contrary to her character, the hero, Kabir, wishes to be like his mother, whom he describes as an ‘artist’. Although an IIM topper, he neither wishes to take over his father’s business empire nor does he show any interest in his father’s wealth. Kia’s professional dreams and Kabir’s desire to be an artist at home fit in perfectly and they marry soon after they meet. The film reverses gender roles by directly flipping the conventional spaces allocated to the male and female genders. While the husband is expected to work and look after his family, the film offers the professional space to Kia. Naturally the domestic space is given to Kabir, the husband who prefers to call himself Kia’s ‘wife’.

The arrangement works out perfectly fine as long as Kia is the only person who goes out and works and Kabir takes care of everything at home. She happily focuses on her career and her professional life soars high. But problems crop up in their relationship when her husband who is initially content with the domestic space, finds a voice outside the domestic sphere. This point in the plot becomes significant as Kabir begins to enjoy his life outside the domestic sphere and no longer occupies the domestic space alone. His unique thoughts about gender equality attract attention and he becomes a social celebrity overnight. While Kia works at her office, Kabir now travels extensively delivering lectures and attending seminars on gender issues. This eventually makes the couple rift part as Kia gets jealous of her husband’s growing fame and success. She accuses him of encouraging men to be lazy, of living on her money and using her for his selfish aims. She considers him to be a con artist who used her for becoming successful by simply doing nothing. The film ends with Kia eventually realizing her mistake and the couple settling into a happily-ever-after life. But the gender questions it opens up and the flipped gender roles it presents before us certainly call for greater thoughts on the deeper ramifications of a space where traditional

gender roles are put topsy-turvy. For a long time men acted as the breadwinners and naturally became the ‘masters of the house’. Can this be changed if he sits at home and lets her work? Does financial empowerment of women usher in a world of gender equality? If women work and men stay at home, will the power dynamics between the genders dissolve or will it lead to the advent of another system of power? If the husband and wife once again settle into exclusive spaces, how happy and egalitarian will the relationship be?

It is rather difficult to achieve gender equality by assigning exclusive zones of operation for the man and woman. The major drawback of such exclusivity in terms of roles and responsibilities is that it again creates boundaries and demarcations. For instance, the marital relationship of the lead characters in the film goes smoothly when each of the partners occupies a distinct space and carries out their roles accordingly. Kia earns well and Kabir creates the perfect domestic atmosphere at home. While one has absolutely no interest in household affairs, the other runs away from all any links with the corporate sphere. The narrative takes care to keep Kia out of the kitchen and Kabir out of her working moments. Nowhere in the film does one come across a scene where Kia helps Kabir with the domestic work or accompanies him shopping. Similarly Kabir, although an IIM topper and the son of a wealthy business tycoon never asks her about her company affairs. Both these are possibilities that could have made the reversed gender roles in the marriage more realistic. Kia and Kabir shopping together or Kabir occasionally asking Ki about how her work is going would only highlight a happy space among them that is open to both the genders. With Kia being the sole breadwinner, she eventually questions his financial dependency on her as she feels her privileged position being threatened when he is no longer the sit-at-home husband. Not just ego and jealousy, but also aspects such as ‘who earns money’ and ‘who is dependent on whom’ pop up their heads disturbing the marital bliss of the young couple.

When women are the only ones who go out and earn or engage in external affairs, it would in the long term bring more power in the female hands and human beings seem to be only too happy to fit everything into well-arranged binaries and hierarchies. There should definitely be the choice of whether or not the man wants to play a part in the professional world just as whether or not the woman wants to stay at home playing the domestic angel. It is important that this choice is given to the individual rather than imposed socially or culturally. And if the persons involved in a relationship decide to go with the either/or gender arrangement making strict choices between the professional and the domestic zones, it is fine as long as the notion of power does not creep in. “Rigidly structured notions about being a man or woman only creates strict boundaries and differentiates the two” (Ishfaq). The movie reminds its viewers that what we need is a space where men and women complement each other without one attempting to rule over the other. If one attempts to rule over the other, the two can never be happily together. This is well reflected towards the end of the narrative when Kia, who has so far focused on her professional dreams and completely ignored her husband’s likes and dislikes, decides to take note of and engage in things that he likes. Her suggestion to travel back from Chandigarh in train since Kabir loves train journeys shows her willingness to share moments with him, rather than inhabiting her exclusive professional space.

Politics of Labels

The politics of labelling each of the partners in a marital relationship is not an innocent affair as a mere label or title to address one. The label of the ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ comes with its own set of socio-cultural baggage of expectations to be met and boundaries to be kept. Responsibilities and duties accompany every role in the human society, but the power relations that come with the husband/wife label also brings with it a set of power politics in the personal space. While *Ki and Ka* does come up with remarkable ideas of gender equality and novel labels like ‘househusband’, one of the most unique ones is Kabir’s decision to be Kia’s ‘wife’. As he remains at home and plays the homemaker role, he prefers to call himself the ‘wife’ in the relationship. In the film’s gender terminology, he plays the ‘wife’ while Kia plays the ‘husband’. This becomes problematic again as by labelling Kia as the husband, the role of being the bread-winner falls on her. In other words, the one who bears the title of the ‘husband’ is the breadwinner-one who goes out and works, and the ‘wife’ stays at home keeping the domestic space functioning smoothly. If we look at it in terms of gender as performance and extend it to gender labels as performance, the husband here is the one who performs the breadwinning role and the wife gets to play the domestic performer again. Kabir adopting the ‘wife’ label reminds one of Judy Brady’s essay “I Want a Wife” where she says:

I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs. I want a wife who will keep my house clean... I want a wife who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be... I want a wife who cooks the meals, a wife who is a good cook. I want a wife who will plan the menus, do the necessary grocery shopping, prepare the meals, serve them pleasantly, and then do the cleaning up while I do my studying... I want a wife who will not bother me with rambling complaints about a wife's duties... When I meet people at school that I like and want to entertain, I want a wife who will have the house clean, will prepare a special meal, serve it to me and my friends, and not interrupt when I talk about things that interest me and my friends... I want a wife who is sensitive to my sexual needs... who makes sure that I am satisfied. I want a wife who assumes the complete responsibility for birth control, because I do not want more children. I want a wife who will remain sexually faithful to me so that I do not have to clutter up my intellectual life with jealousies... When I am through with school and have a job, I want my wife to quit working and remain at home so that my wife can more fully and completely take care of a wife's duties.

This is exactly what the 'wife' (Kabir) does for the 'husband' (Kia) and if this is the case "who *wouldn't* want a wife?" as Brady asks. It also reminds one of novels like *Busy Woman Seeks Wife* (2007) by Annie Sanders. Perhaps a more convenient linguistic labelling would have been when he is still called the 'husband' and Kia as 'wife'. This would deconstruct the politically charged labels - 'husband' and 'wife' - by conveying the fact that the female partner can be the one who earns and interacts with the outside domain and she can still be called as 'wife', and the husband can still be called one by staying at home. Reversing these titles in the narrative makes the film fall prey to its own attempts to break the mould of gender stereotypes, to a certain extent. Hence the occupational operational spaces of these labels still hold on. Perhaps we can even think of doing away with such titles completely. Same-sex marriages and heterosexual relationships where both the man and woman share equal amount of domestic and professional responsibilities are situations which make us ponder on whether such labels hold meaning in contemporary times. As Belkin asks, "Do we need two words, different ones for different sexes? ...Is there actually any difference now between the role of husband and wife? Do we want there to be?" More gender neutral words like 'partner', 'companion', 'lover' or 'spouse' may probably serve the purpose perfectly fine. The point here is not with the mere usage of the term 'husband' or 'wife' but with the pack of social and gender signifiers these words come with. In a heterosexual marital relationship, if 'husband' is merely the male person, why does Kabir prefer to use the tag 'wife'? This naturally points out that 'husband' and 'wife' are not merely gender labels in a marital arrangement but also labels for the roles that they are expected to perform. When Kabir proudly calls himself as Kia's wife and stays at home playing the homemaker, it also unknowingly sends out a message that a wife is the one who performs this function in a relationship with the husband being the breadwinner, protector and so on. While such labels and aspects are probably insignificant in another narrative, it becomes significant in this context as *Ki and Ka* deals with gender equality in the first place. Hence as Belkin writes, while the word 'wife' is certainly "not what it used to be -- but it hasn't yet come to mean something new, either."

Conclusion

The film does a splendid job in challenging the conventional gender roles expected to be played out in the society. It does offer certain lessons on gender equality and puts forth the idea that while individual choices are more important than social conventions, what is even more significant is to keep away from the power binary in terms of gender in a heterosexual relationship. It points out that the villain in man-woman relationship, especially when only one of them is the breadwinner, is not merely gender roles but lopsided power distribution that comes with it. Although the movie is definitely an interesting watch with a brilliant concept and a welcome change from the typical gender stereotypes that Bollywood regularly presents its audience, it does exhibit certain flaws in this gender-reversed space. There are moments when the movie forgets its real intention to crack the crystallized notions of gender roles in the society and falls prey to the very social constructions of gender that it attempts to interrogate. As Shubhra Gupta points out:

With 'Ki and Ka', Bollywood has got to the point of being able to place a man willing to be home, knuckle down to dull domestic chores, and wave the flag for ambitious women and progressive men. So hurrah for Ka and Ki and Balki? Yes, but only up to point. The film is fun when it is setting up the roles. But the execution,

as it goes along, gets rocky. Much of it stays episodic, and starts reinforcing the very stereotypes it set out to negate.

It would be absurd to expect that we need a world where only one of the partners in a marriage work/earn and the other stays at home. But a more practical one especially in the modern world would be one where both the husband and wife work and share their domestic and financial responsibilities. As Sarrah Le Marquand, the editor-in-chief of the Australian magazine *Stellar*, points out, “only with both parents [couple] sharing the stress of the “home-work juggle,” will gender equality improve” (qtd. in Chamie). Inhabiting exclusive spaces comes with boundaries which inevitably usher in some kind of a dominance or the other. What we need is a world where neither the man nor woman dominates over the other, but one where both these genders (and all genders) live as equals. Assigning exclusive spaces to operate for the husband or wife in a relationship would hardly make this happen. A relegation of any one gender in a relationship to a particular space and role would only naturally invite in yet another system of a power binary, when it is precisely that power binary that we seek to break. The question is not who does what but how successfully we are able to prevent the notion of power that creeps in gradually and eventually erects another gender system in place.

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