



REWRITING 'HIS'TORY ON THE OTT

PLATFORM - A STUDY OF BOMBAY BEGUMS REPRESENTATION OF

WOMEN CHARACTERS

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Abstract: Indian cinema in its history of representations has predominantly depicted narratives of the man. Similar to the observations of the media representations by Collins of the two special issues in Sex Roles, the women characters in Indian cinema too are in subordinate supportive roles, such as the abiding wife/ lover, the all sacrificing mother or the opposite -the vamp (Collins 290). In the many decades of Indian cinema, women-centred narratives have been very few. The new advent of OTT platforms has led to changes in these representations. In this study the OTT series, Bombay Begums is studied to closely observe the changes in patterns of narrative. The study intends to highlight the narratives that concentrate on the women's voice focusing on the socialisation of gender based on the Foucauldian Theory of Panopticon through the Male Gaze and its politics, concentrating on the retelling of the story from the women's perspective.

Index Terms: Patriarchy, Women Centred Production, Women Empowerment, Women protagonists.

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic and confinement to homes have created a revolution for the budding media platform of OTT(Over-the-Top). This is an internet-powered media distribution that allows individual viewers to streamline their choice of genre and audio-visual entertainment they wish to view. Gone are the days when the family and large audience will share the cinema viewing experience. The many channels Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, Disney, Zee 5 and many more have allowed for multiple simultaneous streamlined viewership of genres in media that otherwise would be very difficult to present to larger audiences through cinema.

The translations and subtitles, present the provisions of viewership of series and movies in the preferred language allowing for the streamlining of the viewership to hence create provisions for larger viewership and reception that is believed to increase to 46% of entertainment revenue (www.pwc.in/industries/entertainment-and-media/global-entertainment-and-media-outlook-2018-2022.html). This has led many countries and states with different languages and trends to come together and share media creations.

The OTT has presented series and movies, on issues such as infanticide, rape, sexuality, caste, race, LGBTQA+ and many other discriminations of the society that rarely get the representation they deserve. Among many *Paava Kadaigal*, *Delhi Case*, *Bombay Begum*, and *Jai Bhim* to mention a few, brought forth aspects of society that are rampant threats to the future solidarity of the lives of citizens, yet that was never addressed. Beyond these depictions of the many issues of society, the OTT has created a unique platform for woman's individual voices to unfold before the audience.

As history records, in Indian cinema acting in cinema was not seen as a respectable career choice for women. It has been a labyrinth journey, from women not even included in cinema and its presentations to become a lucrative area of interest as a career choice. However, the rise in participation has not influenced the realistic representation of women in Indian media. As the representations have largely been stereotypes of the age-old Indian mythology.

Even with the present-day Indian cinema having the largest onset of experimental, socially conscious and educational presentation of societal issues, with movies on child and human trafficking, organ trafficking, employment scandals, demonetization, electronic economy, education mafia and many more issues. Women's representation hasn't seen much change. Women are clear black-and-white characters of good and evil based on patriarchal norms. The women characters need to maintain the untold laws of body image to be slender, fair and young to remain on screen. It is a rare scenario for women beyond their thirties in commercial cinema as heroines. The few movies and series such as *Arth*, *Fire*, *Water*, *Aruvi*, *Iraivi*, *Pink* and many more, that do present issues such as sexual assault, dowry, marital rape, unequal status in relationships, sexual orientations, LGBTQA+ that voice the marginalized concerns do not receive an enthusiastic audience reception, receiving only critical appreciation, they generally are opposed by the larger public for questioning the patriarchal systems. Thus, leading to a reduced change in society.

With the popularity of the OTT and its representations, there is a need for research in their representations, to observe if it would create better awareness and hopefully lead to gender-neutral socialization. As media, as an agent of socialization develops and internalizes gender stereotypes (Brooks 440)

2. Theories on Socialisation and Gender Roles

The Gaze theory by Laura Mulvey observes the lens through which women are representations. Laura Mulvey's Gaze theory has been revolutionary in providing a platform for extensive studies in relation to the exploration of the scopophilic voyeuristic possibilities of the camera, creating the woman as an entity objectified. The woman character is placed in the passive object position for the sexual expectation and appeal for the male gender (6-18). This Gaze is extended to the 'panopticon', "a circular structure; at the center, a tower with wide windows that opens onto the inner side of the ring" (Bartky 64). This image of an ideal prison by Bentham was extended by Foucault to present the aspect of control and power in society where "the ruler classifies, codes, and classifies individual behaviours to rule their behaviours". Foucault did not differentiate the control and power relations based on the gender hierarchy, but Feminists like Bartky, were able to find similar power relations in creating the female "subject to the evaluating eye of the male connoisseur" (28). This preview of the patriarchal society onto the psyche, in creation of the individual, leading to their inner battles is observed. Collectively through these aspects of representation, in *Bombay Begum*, the internalized sexism, and misogyny in societal gender interactions and its stance in the address of these issues are examined

3. Bombay Begums: An Overview

The series on Amazon Prime, *Bombay Begum*, presents the lives of four women in the city of Bombay. They are all bound by the magnanimous gyre, the Bombay economy. Each woman's strife for survival joins the larger plot. The introduction to the series is a graphic representation of the world the women are associated with, their dreams, and their shackles, which present a glimpse into their lives. These aspects are artistically brought forth to summarize the interrelated politics in these inter and intra juxtapositions they share with each other and the world around them.

Exploring the representation in the introduction of the four main characters in detail, Rani is seen on the throne, symbolizing her status as the CEO of the Bank, though the backdrop has prints stating her to be the first in the long line of the patriarchal hold over the power of economy. Fathima is bound by the expectation of the patriarchal society over the female body, as she reaches the next stage of marriage. She is seen with a backdrop presenting the reflection of the heart in its road of desires towards the man's world of career and the clock symbolizing the fleeting societal imposition of her responsibility towards motherhood and marriage as institutions.

Ayesha and many other women are without a face representing the many women that come to Mumbai with a dream similar to the American dream. Though many are reduced to faceless embodies of dreams, whose existence might become oblivion in the gyre of the Bombay economy.

Shai's introduction has the colour and images of an artist's creation exploring the complexity of love. She is presented as the pictorial narrative of the expectations and reality of the other women in the text. Her narrative and

sketch are integral in mirroring the women's bodies in her art. Similar to 'écriture feminine', exploration of the body as the canvas' ink of expression for women.

The last character, Lakshmi Gondhale /Lily, adorns the throne of the 'other' Bombay economy. The darker yet very true world of Bombay and the struggle to find an escape. The escape from the world of money and power entices women into the sole existence of their body, to transform into a commodity to be bought and sold. Thus, forced to lose the soul's identity.

The representation of these characters' lives is observed based on their struggle with and because of their body, which is intertwined with the patriarchal ideological domination over the woman. Hence the observation of each character is related to the body and the self they adorn wilfully or by force at many stages in life.

3.1 The Arduous March with the Enemy Within: The Story Outline

The women characters in *Bombay Begum* are all part of the employed section of the society, who are hence assumed to be financially rewarded for their services. On the surface, this might be seen as the ideal empowered state. However, the treatment of others towards women is evidence of their true status and expectation of society. As Bartky holds "the disciplinary project of femininity is a set-up; it requires such radical and extensive measures of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail" as "a measure of shame is added to [her] sense that the body she inhabits is deficient" (81)

Rani the queen is at the heights of the success ladder, as examined by the male world, by being the first woman CEO of Royal Bank. Her life might seem like a dream to the many aspiring women as she gets addressed as the queen, though the reality is, the all-male board members instruct her to be the face of the policies of the bank, not as the successful, powerful woman but as the ideal house wife. This attitude is very integral to understanding the final platform on which women are certified by the male agency. The woman can never truly be part of the supposed man's world of the economy. She is also seen presented in the advertisement as the ideal woman who holds the Karvachaud fast and asks the men to seek gold finance for the gift they would be giving their wives for their faithful act of sacrifice.

She is constantly conspired against. The men together undermine her plans and projects to improve the status of the bank. When Rani proposes the plan to introduce a large-scale scheme to improve the image of the bank, there is immediate reproach from the board and the funds are kept on hold until Rani can prove to be as competent as the other men have been as CEO.

Rani though admired by both Fathima and Ayesha, is worried about the dark circles and the beginning of menopause. Her internalized expectations of perfection create a battle within, where she is unable to completely accept her ageing as a virtue.

Fathima is introduced as the aspiring queen who is constantly reminded, 'they can't dare to dream, they lie to themselves as they become the farce for themselves are sacrificing for the society'. Fathima is torn between her duty towards her body's responsibility of motherhood and her desire to be successful in her career. Her personality as a career-oriented straightforward business tactician that she cherishes, is the same trait that is deemed as her

inability to face the inner politics of the economy. Her rise in the career ladders every time ruins the prospects of a good marriage and her supposed role as a mother. Though, Arijay and others around her do not judge or blame her for the miscarriage, Fathima is constantly seen blaming herself for the miscarriage. Fathima's character shows the guilt that women internalize as part of socialization, becoming the cruel critics forcing the soul to the expectations the society powers over the female body.

Ayesha is an aspiring newcomer to the treacheries of Bombay, with a dream. Her efforts towards success and fame are constantly judged by the system for daring to dream. Her education and career are seen as just a platform for a rich groom and a settled life. She has to be employed in order to avert the social pressure of marriage. A single woman who desires to be independent is tagged a 'whore', or 'slut'. Her desire to become successful comes with a sacrifice, similar to many women like Rani, who are expected to believe and confirm through Rani's voice, 'women do use their femininity to their advantage' (*Bombay Begum*, ep.5) negating Ayesha's allegations of an attempt to rape on Deepak Sanghvi.

The status of Lily as a prostitute does not end as an occupational escape to avert poverty. Lily's occupation as a prostitute takes centre stage for her treatment in society. She desires to improve her status from a prostitute to an entrepreneur. However sly her means to reach her desires, all her actions are for a better future for her son and herself, a life of respect. She fights the greater of the battles and becomes a binding force in helping the women realize they all fight the same battles only at different gradations in the male-dominated patriarchy. As the woman on the periphery of society, she stands as the character with the utmost strength in leading the women to realize their autonomy over themselves and uniting the divide between the reality of the women.

Shai is a person in the stage of discovering herself and the body as her own. She is seen as a very independent soul as she liberates the other women who are confined by the expectations of society when for the first time, she accepts Rani despite her brother's terming her a 'slut' for having an affair with Mahesh Rao, and Also when Ayesha is judged an immoral by the housing society for her choice to smoke, Shai states that "it is your choice, it is your body after all" confirming the woman has all the agency to decide, who and what she desires. (*Bombay Begum*, ep.3). However, when it comes to her own socialization of the woman's body, it becomes a cause for her to detest her own body that doesn't fit the image of the young girl's ideal of being fully-breasted, slim and sexualized beauty as presented by media in general. The other girls internalise the object status objectifying the body to appeal to the male voyeur lens (Brooks 440) are also seen sending images of their bodies in order to be appealing to their male peers. Again, confirming the internalization of the male gaze is a surreptitious process affected by peer pressure, resulting in low self-esteem.

3.2 Re-Claiming 'The Body'- 'The Other': The Altered Narrative

This is a text that deals with the women in treacheries of the economy and their battle through its dark lanes. However, their body has always been non-existent from this equation. Till this stage, the public and private realms

of women's lives have never addressed in media. The sexuality of a woman has always been seen as too private a space to address the individuality in women.

Their body is used both as a force and enemy by the dominant patriarchy. The climb and fall of all the women are bound by their bodies. As seen with the incidents of Ayesha, who aspires to be working under Deepak Sanghvi instead of welfare schemes under Rani, (even as the CEO the role that Rani is directly playing is the head of an undermined area of the bank). Ayesha in the hopes of getting Deepak Sanghvi's attention is seen sharing a cigarette with him and asking for a ride. This adoration towards Sanghvi leads to him sexually taking advantage of her. This is witnessed by Lily. After the incident, Ayesha is unable to publicly accuse Deepak Sanghvi as he has taken her under his wings, by transferring her to his department. Lily unable to hold her anger at the injustice, retells the atrocity, but her voice is silenced by the other women. Ayesha is accused and judged by Fathima for ruining a married man's family and reputation just to climb the ladder. In the background, Shai's narration explains the memories for a woman is always bound to her body that are sewn into the woman's body that lingers and scathe deeper.

Finally, with Lily's support, Ayesha is asked to report against Deepak Sanghvi- though the reaction of Rani and Fathima is clearly of the societal judgement of a woman who calls out on sexual assault. Fathima becomes the critical voice of the internalized male gaze that many women face, becoming the possible consorts in the crime against their own gender. In order to sustain her COE position and her deal with Deepak Sanghvi, who has been habitual to such incidents and has been saved earlier by silencing (Karuna Viswanathan an ex-employee). Lily too is bribed by Rani to forsake Ayesha, in order to protect Deepak Sanghvi. Leading women to lose their voice in their search for justice, which would explain the fear in the women who in turn save the perpetrators from their crimes, similar to Rani, who has never disclosed her secrets of abuse at the hands of her mentor.

The poem that is read in the background (by Deepak Sanghvi's daughter) as the rape allegation is explored, creates a platform for all women to perceive the inner voice of confusion that the women face at every step with the parameters of the world expecting the women to be independent yet hold barriers at the threshold to teach them it's not possible in the reality.

Lily too battles the ego of men with power, who detest her for desiring to move beyond the status of a prostitute that society has assigned her. She is abused and cornered by Vijay Sathe, who is enraged at Lily for daring to reject his sexual advances, claiming herself not to be a 'dhande waali' anymore, but after which at every step of establishing the factory, she is reminded that a prostitute can never be part of the mainstream society, as her body is controlled and at the dispense of the patriarchal society. Her desire for love also is declined as she can escape to Dubai with her lover, as even then she can be a mistress, never a wife.

Additionally, there are many instances of sexual abuse and extramarital relationships in the text. Rani comes close to being fired for her sex scandal rumours with Public Resource Bank Governor Mahesh Rao. Fathima too escapes the reality of her failed marriage, with Jeff Freeman, CEO of Brexton Company to whom she confides her fears as a woman - the body and the societal expectations have constantly made her feel she is failing and the

treadmill called life has no possibility of getting off and the journey is tiring without a break (Bombay Begum, ep.5).

However, the men Mahesh Roa, Deepak Sanghvi, Prathyuman Jamwal, Jeff Freeman, Vikram Seth, and Zuravar on a larger scale do not have their careers influenced by their personal sexual lives. Their sexual escapades also confirm the generalised socialisations of sexual intimacy in opposition to the ignored non-sexual intimacies in relationships (Brooks 445). The men even as they stand as perpetrators accuse Rani, Lily, and Fathima Ayesha to be 'sluts'. The wives too come in support of the men accusing the women to have wavered due to their lust for the power the men hold, explaining "men will be men" (Bombay Begum, ep.5).

4. Conclusion

Only towards the end, in the episode aptly called "A Room of One's Own", after Shai's near catastrophic accident after drug usage, and fear of sexual abuse, allows them to realize, both the sexes influence in the creation of the Centrefold Syndrome, negatively reinforcing the gender relations. (Collins 438-447). All women come out of their closet of secrets and shackles that help them realize, reclaiming the autonomy over their bodies with Rani exposing her mentor to the media, owning the repercussions of the scandals, initiating the FIR on Deepak Sanghvi for sexual assault, Ayesha reclaiming her bi-sexuality, confirming with Shai's voice claiming "the truth is painful but owning that truth will set us free", "why shouldn't Eve eat the fruit, isn't she free to eat the fruit she found most juicy" (Bombay Begum ep.5).

The women characters are connected to the eternal source of motherhood (as seen in the poem "Little Red Cap", in the lines, "The glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones" where the speaker identifies with the history of women (Duffy 1-3) with Rani constantly trying to gain the confidence and acceptance of her stepchildren and family, Fathima accepting her state of inability to become a mother, Lily's desperate efforts to change the life for her son, Shai's struggle letting go of the past (her mother's death), and embarking on the present. Their acceptance towards each other's needs builds on the deep source of sisterhood the women explore and share in the preservation of the women in rewriting history, reclaiming the story of the lost identity as seen in Rebecca Solnit's "Grand Mother Spider"¹⁶. *Bombay Begums* by Alankrita Shrivastava and Bornila Chatterjee, similar to the visual text *Ophelia* by Claire McCarthy, retells the story Hamlet from the point of view of Ophelia, rewriting the history of women on screen supporting the Feminist efforts to retell stories of the many truths that the text could present. Hence it encourages the need for women to be more involved in the position of production to help in gender neutral and positive socialization role of media actively empowering women to be individual identities, beyond the stereotyped farce of empowerment

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