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Research Article




## Unveiling Gender Stereotypes: A Feminist Reading of the Film *Bhumika*

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### Abstract

The present research paper is a feminist exploration of the critically acclaimed Hindi film, *Bhumika* (1977), set against the backdrop of Indian film industry, directed by Shyam Benegal, starring Smita Patil, Amol Palekar, Anant Nag, Naseeruddin Shah and Amrish Puri. The

purpose of this study is to unveil gender stereotypes through the film narrative *Bhumika* from the feminist perspective. Besides, it delves mainly into the life and struggle of the female protagonist and a celebrated actress, Usha, who searches for her identity in a patriarchal realm. Hence, in the film *Bhumika*, Usha's journey projects societal confinement and oppression as her image is an embodiment of her struggles against gender roles, showcasing how women were often silenced and how they were limited to their choices. Though, her narrative reflects the need for women's empowerment in such a male chauvinistic world. With an application of feminist theories, the paper unearths how the film *Bhumika* is evident for both to reflect and to challenge the existing traditional gender norms in Indian Society. Apart from these, it examines Usha's journey in terms of power and sexuality, highlighting her multifaceted role as a lens to investigate broader social causes. Thus, the findings of the study help for a better understanding of the intersection of cinema, gender, and society across the world highlighting the role of cinema as a medium for feminist discourse and social critique.

**Keywords:** Women's empowerment, Patriarchy, Feminist film theories, Male-dominated society, Hindi cinema, Gender Roles, Cultural norms, Gender expectations, Female subjectivity, Intersectionality, Narrative structure, Social critique, Archetypes and stereotypes

Cinema has always been an effective medium to unveil the dominant issues in contemporary society. In an explicit way, films have been instrumental to shape the cultural, societal and political beliefs of the common masses. Indian cinema has undergone significant changes in terms of treatment and projection of women's position in addressing societal wealth and woe since independence. Women's representation in films have changed overtime from being dependent on their male counterparts to being an independent individual. The films including, *Dahej* (1950), *Gauri* (1968), *Devi* (1970) and *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988) represent women as dependent, subjugated, meek and weak. Contrary to these, films like *Queen* (2013), *Panga* (2020), *Page 3* (2005), *Mardaani* (2014), *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015), *Parched* (2015), *Nil Battey Sannata* (2015), *Chalk N Duster* (2015), *Neerja* (2016), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017), *Secret Superstar* (2017) and *Ribbon* (2017), project women as confident, bold, rebellious, emancipated and independent. These shifts are strongly accepted by film critics and audiences and also set new facets of women on cinematic screen.

The term 'gender' originated from the Middle English 'gender', a loanword from Anglo-Norman and Middle French 'gendre'. This came from the Latin genus. In 1945, Madison Bentley opined the term "gender" as the "socialized obverse of sex". Though, feminist theory

conceptualizes gender “as a social construct that includes ideologies governing feminine/masculine (female/male) appearances, actions, and behaviors” (Helpme, 123). While the word “stereotype” came from the French adjective “stéréotype” implying ‘solid impression on one or more ideas/theories.’ Gender Stereotype is still a subject matter for discussion among the scholars, academician, social activists, and even to the common masses, through the mechanism of media, social, educational and recreational socialization. These institutions foster gender biases and discrimination. According to the Dictionary of American Psychological Association, “gender stereotype is a relatively fixed, overly simplified concept of the attitudes and behaviors considered normal and appropriate for a male or female in a particular culture. Gender stereotypes often support the social conditioning of gender roles” (APA). Gender has an important and a critical role to play in forming societal values, perceptions and expectations. There is a growing need for gender equality, strengthening all individuals regardless of their gender. Butler states in *Feminist Theorize the Political* (1992):

...any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that that guarantee of solidarity is required in advance, will necessarily produce fact, and that “identity” as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. (Butler, 15)

Butler is of the view that trying to universally define women’s identity as a basis for feminist solidarity possibly leads to inconsistency and cannot advocate for a feminist movement. As for Butler, gender is not a fixed label but an ongoing process of self-expression and assertion, projecting personal identity and behavior rather than one fixed definition. The concept of gender in film is associated with the representation of women on screen. Identifying the depiction of gender roles in cinema is significant as it plays a vital role in shaping societal perceptions of gender. As film is not merely a storytelling rather it is a manifestation of how women are projected on screen, leading to contribution towards a nuanced understanding of gender in the real world.

The notion of feminism in cinema emerged with the interest of feminists, activists and film scholars and critics in context of women’s misrepresentation and underrepresentation in films. Feminist film theory is concerned with multifaceted notions with respect to how women are portrayed on screen, how women’s causes are voiced and how the narratives are built. With the course of time, it also underwent a lot many changes, mainly focusing on women’s objectifications and their silence in the film narratives. Likely, it also examined women’s stereotyping in terms of gender and power dynamics. In this regard, Laura Mulvey in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975 points out on the facet of women:

The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form--illusionistic narrative film. (Mulvey, 21)

Hereto, the above quote examines women as passive subjects for the male gaze in films, unveiling how these dynamic fosters patriarchal projection in the film narrative. Mulvey is prominently known for her theory on sexual objectification of women in the media, commonly known as “The Male Gaze”. In this regard, John Berger has also made a remarkable observation on women being an object of male gaze:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, 47)

Beger projects the societal dynamic wherein men act and women become the object of their gaze, influencing women’s self-perception and their relationships. Likely, the renowned film critic, Hilary Neroni fights for equal treatment between men and women with respect to their economic, political, and social domains. She opines on the notion of feminism, “I define feminism through the idea of contradiction. Feminism is the confrontation with the contradictions that surround women, contradictions that stem from the structure of patriarchal society” (Neroni, 2). Women’s space and position both in real and reel life has been relegated as secondary to their male counterparts. As women often noticed themselves as objects of focus both in their day-to-day life and on screen and this is what Judith Mayne interprets the difference in women’s experience between social realm and the cinematic world:

One of the most basic connections between women’s experience in this culture and women’s experience in film is precisely the relationship of spectator and spectacle. Since women are spectacles in their everyday lives, there’s something about coming to terms with film from the perspective of what it means to be an object of spectacle and what it means to be a spectator that is really a coming to terms with how that relationship exists both up on the screen and in everyday life. (Citron et al., 86)

*Bhumika*, is critically acclaimed Hindi cinema, winning several prestigious awards, including two “National Film Awards” and the “Filmfare Best Movie Award”. The film has also earned international recognition, and has been screened at esteemed film festivals including the Carthage Film Festival and the Chicago Film Festival. The film, *Bhumika*, a cinematic adaptation of the Marathi memoirs of a renowned actress, Hansa Wadkar’s *Aika Sangtye*. The

film is an intricate journey about the protagonist's identity and self-discovery. Usha's transformative journey from a naive and vibrant to a more resilient and mature yet panicked-stricken middle-aged woman which is the crux of her narrative. The role of gender theory as stated in the text, *Sex differences in Social Behavior: Comparing Social Role Theory and Evolutionary Psychology* (1997), "treats these differing distributions of women and men into roles as the primary origin of sex-differentiated social behavior, [and posits that] their impact on behavior is mediated by psychological and social processes" ("Gender"). The film unearths Usha's narrative as a grand-daughter of a renowned singer, coming from the Devadasi community in Goa. Usha has been bold and rebellious since her childhood when Keshav asks her, "Ok, will you marry me?" (*Bhumika*, 14:54-14:58). She rejects, "No, I'll not! I will not" (14-58-15:00). As she grows young, she becomes more revolting but marries Keshav against her mother's wishes in order to escape restrictions and boundaries around her. But she was unaware of the circumstances that it was her beginning to fall prey to the hands of societal structure. At the peak of her career, Usha thought of leading her life as a housewife. She asks Keshav, "You said you will marry me? Yes, we will marry. I do not want to work. I will leave this film life totally" (40:00-40:20). But after marriage, she fails to live her life on her own terms and conditions and Keshav starts making decisions about her life which is evident from the following:

Producer was saying you have refused his next picture. Yes, now we will have a baby and household work will increase. That is true, but my business has still not been set. The responsibility of Shantabai and grandma is on us. Producer said he will finish the film fast. But! You don't worry at all, I have told him, we will do the film. But under any circumstances Rajan will not be in the film. (50:34-51:40)

Hence, Usha's life drastically changes when she comes to Bombay with Keshav Dalvi in order to avoid a vicious cycle of abusive homely atmosphere. Here, Usha's journey starts with her successful audition as a singer, leading to stardom followed by some quick succession of events such as her marriage with Keshav which later on bears problems in their married life. Usha feels obliged to Keshav as she sees him as an instrumental saviour of her perturbed life in Goa. This is one of the reasons she succumbed to the marriage with Keshav. Later Keshav witnessed a financial crisis which left him solely and economically dependent on Usha. Now Usha earns more than Keshav, which is unacceptable to him because of his patriarchal mindset. But out of compulsion, he has to accept her as a breadwinner of the family. This is also one of the reasons behind their unsuccessful married life. Here, Shashi Deshpande has very well highlighted regarding the prevalent mindsets of a patriarchy driven society:

A wife must always walk a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A, you should be a B.A. If he is 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and nineteen nine rupees. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 137)

The best instance of Usha's dilemma and struggle resembles Uma from another Hindi film *Abhimaan* (1973), directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, where the female protagonist, Uma has a more fabulous career than her husband Subir. Nevertheless, Uma yields before her legitimate husband because of his hailing from a male chauvinistic world where women are considered subordinate to men. In this regard, Neroni views film as an art to reflect societal biases in her book *Film Theory in Practice: Feminist Film Theory and Cléo from 5 to 7* (2016). She says:

Film as an art has reflected the biases of the social order and amplified the myths of woman as sexual object and woman as mother. Cinema has been an important vehicle for the dissemination of ideology surrounding women, and both feminism and feminist film theory have had recourse to the theory of ideology in order to critique society and film. (Neroni, 6)

As the storyline unravels, Usha's journey is a series of heart-throbbing experiences, unfolding the repressive nature of patriarchal set up society. Usha's life is a reflection of her solitude and longing. The film is an exploration of Usha's complicated bond with Keshav because of her recent success in prospective career, and likely relations start debasing. As Keshav turns into a controlling manager and an envious husband. Nevertheless, Usha's earning is the sole financial support for their family and this puts an adverse strain on their relationship. Thus, she is stuck between her flourishing career and troubled marriage. Now she finds herself caught in the same unfavorable homely atmosphere from where once she desperately wanted an escape. These unpleasant incidents push her towards developing affection with her colleagues which adds insults to her injury, leading her to a grave situation. Likely, Usha continues to get involved in unsatisfying affairs, including first with director, Sunil Verma and then with a wealthy businessman, Vinayak Kale. At some points in every relationship, she gets trapped in more traumatic situations, leaving Usha yearning for freedom and self-respect. Hereto, the film explores women's subjective experiences and the existing societal boundaries defining their gender-specific roles from feminist perspective. In this context, Lauretis's *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (1987) is obvious to reflect:

For the time being, then, feminist work in film seems necessarily focused on those subjective limits and discursive boundaries that mark women's division as gender-specific,



a division more elusive, complex, and contradictory than can be conveyed in the notion of sexual difference as it is currently used. (Lauretis, 135)

The film *Bhumika* is a prominent cinematic work, showcasing complicated lives of women in a patriarchal society. In his view about patriarchy, Andrew Cherlin interprets patriarchy as “a social order based on the domination of women by men, especially in agricultural societies” (Cherlin, 93). Though Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid states about the patriarchal realms which are not “systems either predating or super-added to caste and class but are intrinsic to the very formation of, and changes within, these categories” (Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 1). They see the association between classes and patriarchies as complex and variable and they further opine:

Patriarchies are entangled with modes of social ordering... and with existing hierarchies and modes of subjection, they also appear to have no single one to one relation with a given mode of production but seem to change through over-lap and reformulation. In this sense they have a relative autonomy and a different duration. The lives of women exist at the interface of caste and class inequality, especially since the description and management of gender and female sexuality is in-volved in the reproduction and maintenance of social inequality. (5)

Usha resists against the patriarchal constraints and attempts to emancipate herself from the same culminates into her individuality, fighting against the predicament of caste, class, and gender inequality. While Usha’s refusal to accept her daughter’s invitation to live with her symbolizes her struggle for independence and the bubble of emotions, ensuring her individual existence. The film ends with Usha, being alone in her hotel room, reflecting the subject of identity, individually, sacrifice, and the relentless pursuit of self-attainment.

To conclude, this study is a feminist analysis investigating Shyam Benegal’s *Bhumika* in order to highlight existing gender stereotypes in society through the life journey and hardships of Usha. Usha’s narrative becomes a dominant lens through which the study manifests societal norms and expectations. Besides, it offers a challenging exploration of gender stereotypes within the narrative of film. Thus, the film *Bhumika* stands against ingrained stereotypes through Usha’s life experiences and decisions, fostering women’s empowerment and dismantling restrictive gender roles. Hereto, the film projects how socially constructed gender identity is still an issue to human beings, when they decide to lead life on their own terms and conditions in the same social domain.

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