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Indian Cinema: Making Departure from the Stereotypical Presentation of Women in Nuptial

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Abstract

In the late 20th and 21st century various movements took place which challenged the stereotypical notions of gender in society. #MeToo movement gave a momentum to the society where people started talking about any kind of violence, sexual assault and harassment against women. Many government policies and laws were framed and implemented to provide equal opportunities to women in every field. Vishakha Guidelines and Internal Complaints Committee are made mandatory at work place and education institutions to assure a safe and healthy environment for females. Now the issues brushed under the carpet for long have been brought into light. Issues which were considered taboo even to talk about are now discussed on public forums and academia, penned down in literature and projected in media and cinema. Women and their concerns and point of views found space in popular cinema and were acclaimed too by the critics as well as spectators. Bollywood has made deviations from the stereotypical portrayal of women and broke the silence on issues like sexual consent and female sexuality. It also showed the role of woman in marriage and how it's changing with woman becoming economically independent and

realizing her real worth. The present paper will deliberate on the institution of marriage and the role of woman in it in the Indian society especially in the context of Indian cinema. It will discuss recent Indian cinema which came with stories in which decision-making power has been exercised by women in a nuptial and consent of a girl in a marriage has been considered. Gender roles in a marriage will also be analysed which has been shown deviating from the stereotypical notion especially in the movies *Ki & Ka* and *Tumhari Sulu*. It will include the movies which have at the centre the idea that the courage of a woman can put a full stop to the deep-rooted patriarchy of centuries in our society. The paper will include only popular cinema made in Hindi language film industry known as Bollywood in the last decade like *Dil Dhadkane Do*, *Badrinath Ki Dulhania*, *Secret Superstar*, *Parched* and *Tumhari Sulu*.

Keywords: Stereotype, Discrimination, Suppression, Liability, Equality, Violence, Patriarchy

Badrinath Ki Dulhaniya (2017) is a romantic film directed by Shashank Khaitan based on the love story of Badri and Vaidehi set in middle class in Jhansi and Kota. But the movie starts with gender-based discrimination by addressing girl a ‘liability’ and boy ‘an asset’. Through Vaidehi’s character the movie raises many questions on the institution of marriage. Why a girl is considered burden on her family? Why a girl’s parents have to sacrifice the savings of their entire life in her marriage? Why she should be punished for saying no to a marriage? Vaidehi is not ready to make compromises and surrender to the strong patriarchy. She runs from her marriage because she can’t live a suppressed and submissive life. She wants to make her own identity and become independent. But this step of hers is taken as an insult by boy’s father who has the view that ‘a girl should not forget her dignity. If she does this, she should be punished. She should be killed publicly to teach a lesson to every girl.’ Why this tag of honour and dignity is labelled to a girl only? Why her wish to live her life on her terms is branded as a crime? Her statement ‘Kyun humko tola mola jaa raha he?’ questions the society which treats a girl like an object. Badri’s sister-in-law is a highly educated woman but she is not allowed to work. Her husband loves her and takes her support in business finances but can’t give her that credit publicly and stop the discrimination at home. The climax scene of the movie is enlightening where a ritual is taking place for Badri’s sister-in-law to have a baby boy as she is pregnant. The drunk Badri mocks at the ritual which he feels is insulting for a woman. He announces that Vaidehi’s decision of running from her marriage was correct otherwise she too had to live this repressed, shadowed life. Suparna Thombare says, “A drunken speech is not enough to change the deep-rooted patriarchal mindset, and though there is a problem with that I am also happy to see that it sets an example for the youth — that they need to stand up and raise their voices against it and live their lives on their own terms.”¹ This whole dialogue including his revolutionary statement ‘Hum Vaidehi ka dulha banenge. Wo Singapur me job karegi aur hum uske saath hain’ sets a trend for every man to respect the woman and her dreams.

Secret Superstar (2017) is a family drama directed by Advait Chandan. It shows a marriage where husband treats his wife worse than an animal. He insults her and beats her on

trivial things like less salt in dal. She can be seen many a time with scars on her face which is witnessed by her daughter Insia who finds it intolerable and asks her mother to leave her father. But Najma (Insia's mother) cannot do that because of her financial dependence. There is an important reason behind woman's subjugation that is economic dependence. But at the end Najma protests, divorces her husband and leaves with her kids which shows what is required to end this centuries long patriarchy is the courage a woman needs to have.

Parched (2015) is a drama film written and directed by Leena Yadav which highlights physical abuse and marital rape a woman is subjected to. Set in a rural setting it brings to light the strong patriarchy which determines a woman's life. There is an incidence in the movie where a girl named Champa comes back to her parents' house because she is beaten mercilessly and raped constantly by the males at her in-law's place. But she is forced to go back against her will. Even her parents don't support her. They are fine if their daughter is killed but they are not willing to protest this satanical treatment because they will be debarred from the society- a tool to terrorize people so that the power exercised by men in the name of culture can be protected.

"Leena has the perfect, real backdrop of rural India where women believe they are not supposed to study, as it makes them 'bad wives' and want to have child so they can save a marriage where the man thrashes them day in and out."² Lajjo is trapped in a violent nuptial bond where she is smacked ruthlessly by her alcoholic husband and tortured mentally by calling 'useless' and 'baanjh' as she can't conceive. It brings to the ground the notion that a woman is not a human being but a sex object and a child-bearing machine. Later Lajjo comes to know that she is not infertile, her husband is when she conceives with other man. On this her husband turns into a devil as his manhood is challenged and thrashes her vehemently. But here Lajjo gets courage and challenges him to accept his infertility in front of the panchayat.

Rani's daughter-in-law Janki is a victim of child marriage, forced marriage and marital rape. She wanted to study but as the males of the village establish that education spoils woman and stops her from being a good wife, her fate was written by the men of her family and books were replaced by sindoor. Her husband Gulab takes her as his property and rapes her. Rani witnesses all this which she herself faced when her husband was alive which stamps it as a regular incident.

At the end both Rani and Lajjo show courage along with their friend Bijli and leave the village to start a new life at their own. Rani frees Janki also from her marriage and sends her with her love interest with a promise to continue her study. This movie is a fine example which voices women courage and like Secret Superstar hammers the idea that woman doesn't have to wait for a knight in shining armour to save her but she herself is strong enough to write a new story for herself.

The status of woman as secondary sex is not limited to the lower or middle class only. High class society too has the same gender discriminations. *Dil Dhadkane Do* (2015), a family drama in upper class directed by Zoya Akhtar portrays the same. Mainly it deals with the sibling's relation but Ayesha, played by Priyanka Chopra, brings into light many questions related to marriage in Indian society. The conversation between Ayesha and her

mother highlights the gender discrimination in marriage. Ayesha asks her mother why didn't she divorce her father when he had multiple affairs, didn't bother about her emotions, even she was invisible for him. Her answer to this, "To end a marriage is easy. To save that and struggle for solutions is hard and RIGHT." Now comes the question – who made that right? This patriarchal society? Ayesha puts a question on the institution of marriage by saying "Marriage is not a race that anyhow you have to reach to the finish line." Marriage is a bonding between two individuals who share each other's sorrows and happiness, support each-other in thick and thin, value each-other. They are equally important in this relation like two wheels of a bike. But Indian society treats it like a train where husband is the engine who controls everything and a wife like a boggy moves behind it with no stake in the movement. She even supports Ayesha's husband saying, "He is a good guy, will never let you face any scarcity." As if to provide materialistic things to one's wife is the parameter of a man's being good husband. Love, passion, support are irrelevant things in a married life. Ayesha's answer to this that then they should have got her married to a MALL, shows her vocal attitude – not a traditional trait of a female. Career is not important for a woman as said by her mother, "Success of your business has spoilt your mind. Leave your career and focus on your family." A mindset developed by the patriarchal society to keep woman dependent and submissive which Ayesha is not going to follow. Ayesha's mother-in-law also propagates old, tradition-ridden ideas where in a matrimony a woman is not allowed to speak, put her views, not to do any job and devote her whole life in the service of her husband and family. She comments on her of not taking care of the house as she is running her own company. When Ayesha explains something to Kabeer she is stopped in middle by her mother-in-law targeting her for being vocal. Ayesha's expression on this is self-explanatory. She is not valued there for her ability, not appreciated for her commendable success, not understood as a human. Her mother-in-law's statement "how much we have invested in her in these years" stamps that she is an object or some project not a human being who needs to be loved, understood and valued. But Ayesha is a modern, educated, strong-headed and independent girl who is not going to surrender to these notions which take every right of living from her. She is not going to drag a marriage for her whole life just because of the fear of the society.

After Ayesha's declaration of her divorce the way she is questioned shows as if she has committed a crime. She is sitting at one corner, everyone encircling her as if the police are investigating a criminal. No one understands her except her brother. In Indian social environment, "women's decision to remain single (unmarried, separated and divorcee) is codified as denial to their assigned duty of reproduction and transmitting the traditional social rules and values across generations."³Hence this decision of hers is strongly opposed by her parents and in-laws. Rather she is advised to have a baby as if that is the solution to all the problems of a married life. Giving birth to a child has also been used by the society to put one more shackle in a woman's feet. Even her own parents are not supporting her. Once married a girl is abandoned of all the rights in her maternal home. Her father says he won't take her back to his house as it's not her home now. He denounces her saying, "We are not going to support this nonsense." What a mental torture to a girl who is abandoned by her own family!

But Ayesha is an independent girl and she is not going to advocate this centuries old notion “Doli me aayi thi arthi me jaungi”. A girl through which Indian movies are propagating the idea of an independent and strong woman.

The best dialogue advocating gender equality in marriage is between Manav (Ayesha’s husband) and Sunny (her love interest and a journalist who writes on gender discrimination). Manav accuses Sunny of exaggerating gender issues and says time is changing by giving his family’s example – “No lady did a job till my father’s generation. Then I allowed Ayesha to start her business.” Sunny’s answer to this is true feminist voice, “Why does she need your permission? When you allow someone, you give yourself some authority, some position. And this is not equality.” This dialogue serves as a catalyst in changing women’s lives.

Ayesha’s parents portray a hypocritical marriage. Her father who does not even notice her mother when they are alone, announces his love in public to have a good image in the society. Her mother continues this dead relation because she has nowhere to go if she leaves him as she confesses at the end. The bad image of a single woman in the society does not allow the parents to accept their daughter if she comes back. Once married forever gone, this notion is demolished by Ayesha and her family at the end with a strong voice that parents should support their daughters.

In *Piku*, we love Piku’s father Bhaskor Banerjee because of his strong feminine ideals. He calls a marriage without purpose low IQ. His dialogue, “All a husband wants is that a wife should serve food in the day and sex at night. But is that a woman made for?” puts a question on the institution of marriage where woman is considered secondary. There is no stake of her in decision making. Bhaskar encourages women to be independent and value themselves rather being a puppet in the hands of her husband. His dialogue, “Throwing away your identity, your knowledge, respect, brain in the fire while taking the seven vows and then leading your life is low IQ decision.” very succinctly and precisely brings forward the real status of Indian wedding. Bhaskar sets new example for Indian fathers as well who think of their daughter’s marriage day and night and will go to extremes to do that. He does not want his daughter to be married as for him this should not be the end goal for a girl to enter the nuptial.

Piku played brilliantly by Deepika Padukone is an independent architect running her own architecture firm with her business partner Sayeed. She is mothering her 70-year-old father and is too clear about her priorities and demands that if a man wants to marry her, he must be ready to adopt her old and eccentric father. “The onus of caring for parents is not just a son’s job. A daughter can do it equally well.”⁴ A statement passed strongly by Piku. There is one more female character i.e., Piku’s mashi played by Mousumi Chatterjee who with her three marriages and ready to enter into the fourth one attitude breaks new grounds in the concept of marriage in our society. She asks Piku about her sex life in a very casual manner and advises her to find a lasting solution to her ‘needs’. To satisfy one’s physical needs was one of the reasons a person should get married from ancient times. But these two women are setting new trends and giving new definitions to this age-old institution.

Marriage is not the end goal of new age girls. Naina in *Ye Jawani he Diwani* is a strong-headed girl who is clear about her priorities in life which she is not going to compromise even for the love of her life. At the end Bunny is the one who leaves his job and comes back to her – an exemplary situation hammering the idea that sacrifice in love is not meant for girls only. Geeta in *Swadesh* also, like Naina, is not ready to go with her love interest leaving her responsibilities of her village behind. Finding love and getting married is not the only goal for 21st century women. They have other responsibilities also which they need to fulfill.

Toilet-Ek Prem Katha is a movie of its own kind. It shows a wife is not going to be an ideal wife sacrificing everything even her self-esteem. When her basic need of having a toilet is not fulfilled she does not compromise and leaves her husband though she loves him. Bhumi Pednekar in *Dum Laga Ke Haisa* is a woman who is not going to plead her husband to keep her or be his slave for her whole life. She decides to end this marriage if there is no love and respect for her in her husband's heart.

Love per Square Feet is a movie which gives agency to a woman who speaks for herself, makes decisions and knows what she wants in life and is headstrong to get that. She wants an equal treatment, equal sharing in a family life rather to be treated as a responsibility or a fragile object which needs special care. Mamta in *Sui Dhaga* is also a strong woman who plays equal role in decision making in the family affairs and supports her husband in his new venture. Pretty in *Chak De India* is also a woman of agency who rejects Abhi's proposal as Abhi never appreciated her individuality, her accomplishments in her sport. Her career was not important, she was supposed to be Abhi's wife.

Some movies like *Tumhari Sulu*, *Ki & Ka* and *Mary Kom* shatter the typical gender roles in a wedding. *Ki & Ka* is a movie of its own kind where the concept of stay-home dads and working women has been popularized. In *Mary Kom* her husband supports her in thick and thin and unlike stereotypical husbands complicating situation for her, helps, motivates and boosts her to pursue her dream and prove to the world that nothing can stop a woman. Her husband takes care of the children and does the household duties to support his wife. In *Tumhari Sulu*, Sulochana too has a stake in her married life. Her husband never comes in her way of pursuing her dreams of becoming independent. When she became a RJ and had night shifts he makes the kid ready to go to school. He does not hesitate to massage her feet when she gets tired after a long day which is completely opposite to culturally fixed male roles in a nuptial bond. These movies portray that one should not be rigid in role playing in a marriage, an amicable environment needs to be created.

At the end the paper concludes that in recent times Indian cinema has shown some interesting departures from the stereotypical presentation of woman in a marital relation. It does not highlight the symbols of marriage like sindoor and mangalsutra which take away the individual identity of a woman and define her as someone's wife. She has been given agency, decision power, consent and courage to raise her voice against any harassment in a marriage. Encouraging equality, refuting social evils like dowry, domestic violence, forced marriage

and marital rape and giving voice to women characters Indian cinema is contributing to women empowerment.

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