Problematization of the Portrayal of India and the West in Indian Film Narratives

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Abstract

Portrayal of various cultures in visual narratives, more specifically in the film narratives, is getting closer scrutiny in recent years. In this context, the present paper intends to address some of the issues regarding the depiction of Indian society and the West by examining two Hindi films that have been a huge success in the box office for the sensitive portrayal of its leading women characters. The movies that are discussed here include *English Vinglish* and *Queen*. These two movies have won critical acclaim for the brilliant performances and thematic concerns. However, the primary concern of this paper is to raise certain questions about the representation of Indian society as well as the West in these films. Thereby, the paper tries to show that these visual narratives, apart from entertaining the audience, can also be studied as sites for raising certain theoretical questions pertaining to Indian society.

Key words: Film Studies, Feminist narratives, Indian society, West, Empowerment.

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In the recent years, film studies and cinematic literature are emerging as one of the major academic preoccupations. Films are getting debated not only among the viewers and media but also in academia with theoretical interpretations. No wonder, India being a land with the highest production, consumption and circulation of films, the film narratives are becoming a subject of closer scrutiny. New genres of films are capturing the attention of the public and intellectuals and are also discussed for the personal and social issues that they raise within their narrative spaces.

When we look at the depiction of Indian society in some of the contemporary films, specifically, movies made in Hindi, two kinds of depictions become conspicuous. One set of movies presents India as a land of spirituality, as a land where the strength of the country lies in family bondage and deep-rooted traditions etc. Here, references can be made of the movies like *Pardes, Namastey London, Hum Saath Saath Hai* and movies with similar themes. In such movies, India is shown as something that is in contrast to the materialistic West. Sometimes, such depictions appear to be too much of generalization and unrealistic.

Another set of movies project India in darker shades – as a poverty stricken and caste ridden land, a dirty space, patriarchal, traditional, and superstitious and basically as an oppressive society. Movies like *Slum Dog Millionaire, PK, Mritydund*etc. can be quoted as examples. Most of the feminist movies depict Indian society as patriarchal. Certain movies in this category have been criticized for their negative portrayal of India. There seem to be some amount of discontentment with such depictions. Some argue that films in India are made for the international audience and such darker themes sell well in the entertainment markets abroad and make a mark in the award ceremonies. When we look at these arguments, it becomes evident that the representation of Indian society in popular media like films is a problematic concern.

This paper intends to address some of the issues regarding the depiction of Indian society and the West by examining two Hindi films that have been a huge success in the box office for the sensitive portrayal of its leading women characters. The movies that are discussed here include *English Vinglish* and *Queen*. These two films have won critical acclaim for the brilliant performances and thematic concerns. However, the primary concern of this paper is

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Two Films and Striking Similarities

The two Hindi films *English Vinglish* and *Queen*are appreciated for their fine blend of feminist undertones. It is a known fact that feminism as an idea and discourse has exerted a significant influence on literature, theatreand films. Feminist theories have given ample tools to the theorists to examine the manner in which women are portrayed in popular culture, especially in cinema which is described by Indubala Singh as the most effective medium for communicating an idea (Singh 2007). Hence, it can be said that feminism has exercised its impact on film studies as rightly observed by Patricia white, "As a critical methodology, feminism makes salient the category of gender and gender hierarchy in all forms of knowledge and areas of inquiry. The female image – the female as image- has been a central feature of film and related visual media; in film criticism and theory, making gender the axis of analysis has entailed a thoroughgoing reconsideration of films for, by, and about women, and a consequent transformation of the canons of film studies" (White 1998).

Influenced by feminism, theorists are subjecting the portrayal of women in films to serious scrutiny and are exploring the objectification and commodification of women protagonists, especially in the mainstream cinema. For instance, locating the films within the framework of psychoanalysis, theorists like Laura Mulvey have blended films and feminism with psychoanalysis. In her persuasive essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" published in 1975, Mulvey studies the depiction of women and cinematic gaze in Hollywood movies. She argues that women are used in Hollywood movies basically for providing "narrative pleasure" to men. She also emphasizes the need for developing new approaches while making films. She traces objectification of the image and identification with it which in turn exhibit the mental desires of the male audience as the two modes in which Hollywood films busy themselves in the production of pleasure. Similar explorations have also been made with

regard to representation of women in what is popularly referred to as Bollywood movies in India.Manjiri Prabhu, for instance, explores the way in which Hindi films suppress women by prescribing to stereotypical portrayal of women characters.

At the same time, in the recent years, there is an increasing trend of making movies that explore various themes within feminism. A few filmmakers are engaged in breaking the stereotypical images of women and Diane Garrett uses the term "pink wave" to describe this phenomenon. Garrett's article, "Why So Many Feminist - Leaning Movies Now? May be Because It's Time" (2019) draws our attention to the "pink wave" and rightly captures the increasing trend of making movies that explore various themes within feminism. Even though the article captures the shift in the mood of film makers specifically with reference to Hollywood movies, the issue discussed in the article seems to be relevant to film making in general in the past few years in countries like India where a huge number of films are being produced, marketed and released every year. In the backdrop of Diane Garrett's article, one can say that _English Vinglish_and _Queen_ confirm to this "pink wave" notion.

Amidst the studies onthe objectification and commodification of women and leading ladies and theoretical interpretations of feminist stances in Indian cinema, the two movies _English Vinglish_and _Queen_ stand apart for their sensitive portrayal of the evolution of female characters. _English Vinglish_(2012) written and directed by Gauri Shinde narrates the story of a middle-aged woman Shashi Godbole who is yearning to create her own space and identity in her family. She is an entrepreneur, a caring mother, a wife and a 'sanskaribahu'. However, her difficulty lies in her inability to speak English because of which she sometimes becomes the target of ironic comments and jokes within her family. Shashi silently withstands certain instances where she is hurt solely because she cannot converse in English with fluency and this shakes her confidence level. Suddenly, a new twist is added to the story when she has to fly to the US to attend her niece's wedding. With much trepidation, she travels alone managing to give mugged up answers to the security queries. Once in New York, she joins a four-week spoken English course and is all determined to learn English. Her interaction with

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her classmates and the support she receives from her peers during the entire course brings in her the lost confidence. Much to the astonishment of her snobby daughter and husband, she even delivers a wedding speech highlighting the importance of family life. Her family realizes their insensitivity towards her and now they are full of admiration for this new Shashi.

Queen (2014), directed by Vikas Bahl narrates the story of a young bride Rani who is deserted by her groom on the wedding day because he suddenly realizes that she is not meant for him. Though broken - hearted, Rani decides to go alone for her honeymoon destinations. The very narrative of a dejected woman on her honeymoon with herself is something unusual for an Indian audience. Travels outside India are an enriching experience to the otherwise timid Rani. She travels alone, meets new people; makes new friends, takes up the challenges that come on the way and transforms herself into a confident and smart woman. A few days of stay and travel abroad acts as a metamorphosis for her that leaves the people around her in surprise. She is no longer the Rani who cries over her boyfriend's rejection. She has evolved from a jilted lover to someone who has discovered herself. She is now self-assured and happy to reject his efforts to renew his romantic ties with her.

Both the films thus provide enough opportunities to explore the other side of a woman's personality. These two cinemas are in fact appreciated for the portrayal of woman characters thus providing enough site for feminist interpretations.

Portrayal of India and the West – A Few Issues and Questions

Apart from the above-mentioned similarities regarding the thematic concerns and the portrayal of women protagonists, the most striking similarity between these two films lies in the 'locale' that is chosen to provide exposure for the women characters. As long as these women are in India, they are shown as leading a routine life within their domestic set up. Once out of India, they have the opportunity to learn, mingle and empower themselves. New York, in *English Vinglish* becomes a symbol of freedom for Shashi. Free from her family responsibilities, it is in New York that Shashi can explore herself. Same is the case with Rani too. Both the women embark upon a journey from embarrassment towards empowerment and

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what is interesting is the locale chosen for this journey. It is interesting to note that the characters feel empowered not within the space of India or Asia but in the West. By the time, Shashi and Rani return to India, they are no longer the diffident and under confident women who were often the targets of subtle insults and sympathies. The narratives beautifully and explicitly trace the growth of the women characters. In the process, they also do something else- both the films build an implicit image of Indian society and the West. This needs to be explored further.

In both the films, the West is the location which is presented as a liberating agent. The West becomes the symbol of freedom and empowerment. It empowers an individual to access his or her freedomwhich is very essential for human beings. In these two films, West is depicted as something that empowers women by making them access their freedom.

If the West is portrayed as a space for achieving empowerment, India is shown as the opposite. There is a prevalent feminist claim that being 'free' is curbed in India because of the existence of 'patriarchy'. The system of patriarchy does not allow a woman to explore freely by imposing on her certain constraints that are taken out of men's world and it does not accept modern values in contrast to the West. Posited in the backdrop of patriarchy, the movies seem to suggest that the moment a woman goes out to Europe or America, the constraints of men's world that are imposed on her in India disappear because the West believes in freedom. As a consequence, a woman becomes a free person. She gets empowered in the sense that she gets the opportunity to access her freedom. These notions become evident in the manner the movie makers choose the destinations or location for the process of self-realization of their characters. It is obvious that the outer journey also symbolizes the inner journey of the characters. Rani travels alone and explores Europe. Shashi wanted to learn English and she accomplishes this task in New York. Therefore, a sense of freedom helps them realize what they want to achieve. The West, in both the cases, becomes the symbol of empowerment. Both Shashi and Rani are born and brought up in India and they go out of the country just for a few days. What they couldn't achieve within India throughout their lives, they are shown as accomplishing it once they go out of the country, that too for a brief period of time. Shashi's four weeks stay in New York helps her to explore

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herself which she could never do in India. Same is the case with Rani too. They come back empowered with the sense of freedom or empowered to exercise their freedom.

This raises two important issues – a) By going to the West, freedom is achieved or accessed and b) Access to freedom is achieved in one particular place, I, e West.

Consequently, it is shown that it is the West that empowers one to access freedom. In a disguised manner, the movies indicate that the two women get empowered only because they go toWest and the West is the only place which is an embodiment of modern values like freedom, liberty, equality, democracy etc. These values are available only in the West because West is developed and modern. They are absent in India as India is underdeveloped and pre - modern. These interconnected ideas about India and the West runs in the underbelly of these two films.Thus, in a camouflaged manner these films suggest that empowerment in the sense of access to freedom is achieved only because the leading ladies go out of India to the West.

Accordingly, from the above formulation, it becomes clear that the two women acquire freedom in the West. In the background of this formulation, one can make certain observations within the space of both the movies that are quite contrary to what the films suggest about the West and India. In the films, we see that Rani's parents do not prevent her from going abroad. Shashi's family encourages her to fly on her own. People around Shashi or Rani have never discouraged them from doing what they want to do. Hence, these two women know how to go about the world even before setting their foot in the West. Therefore, to show that these women picked up a sense of individual freedom only because they went to the West would be like making a blank statement.

In the case of the movies under discussion here, Shashi would have learnt English had she joined English classes in India. Rani's story would have been recreated by showing her travels within India. But what makes the choice of the West as the locale is this idea that the West is modern in terms of values while India is still underdeveloped. Subsequently, both the movies build an image that the West is a model that needs to be followed by traditional and patriarchal societies like that of India as far as freedom, equality and space for self - exploration of women is concerned. In both the movies, one can see the continuity in the

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lines of age-old description about India as patriarchal, underdeveloped etc. and the West as liberated and modern.

Thus, the question of depiction of India and the West in the movies calls for a thorough investigation as one can see the reproduction and continuation of colonial descriptions about India and the west.

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