

Mirrored Roles; Gender Stereotypes In Indian Shortfilms

Harsha^{1*}, Balagopal A.M² and Dr. Sreenath Muraleedharan K³

¹PG scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi campus, India. Contact +91 9947715897 harshasurendranathan@gmail.com

²PG scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi campus, India.

³Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi campus, India. k.sreenath@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

W.J.T. Mitchell has famously remarked that we are in the midst of a “pictorial turn,” and it is the image(s) that play an increasingly important role in digital and multimodal communication. The paper is structured around the portrayal of women in the following Indian short films; *Churri*, *Freedom At Midnight*, *Juice* and *Maa*. Realism pours out of the aforementioned visual representations via the treatment of the subject. Here, man and woman-‘the binaries’, are explored along the lines of familiar social constructs. The study therefore sheds light onto possible interpretations of scenes and how people in general tend to view and showcase themselves under the idea of genderism.

Keywords : feminism, constructs, media influence

Introduction

Patriarchy permeates all social institutions: the household, the workplace, as well as the state. It is a system of social structures and practices in which cisgender heterosexual men who are considered to be the "patriarch" dominate people of other gender identities and marginalized sexualities, hold most positions of power, and enjoy many privileges. Although patriarchy is set up in a way to benefit cisgender heterosexual men, it can also be harmful to them in many ways. Individuals are expected to adhere to the gender hierarchy in this structure, and are assigned specific roles, characteristics, and social positions as a result. They are, then, penalized for transgressing these oppressive norms set by society.

The belief in and advocacy of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes is known as feminism. It has altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of areas within the western society ranging from culture to law. Feminists and scientists have split the history of the movements into three waves. The first wave mainly concerns women's votes in the late 1900's and early 2000's, which are mainly women's voting rights. The second wave refers to the ideas and actions of the women's freedom movement from the 1960s. The third wave refers to the continuation of, and liberation of the perceived failures of, second wave feminism, beginning in the 1990s.

In its now popular declaration of sentiments, abolitionists like *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* and *Lucretia Mott* openly declared, in 1848, that "we consider these realms as self-evident; that all men and women are equal." The feminists controversially demanded "their sacred freedom to vote" or right to vote. The US Congress in 1972 adopted the amendment on equal rights that sought legal equality for women and prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex. In *Roe v. Wade*, a landmark judgment guaranteeing women's rights to choose abortion, feminists celebrated one year later the Supreme Court ruling.

Some argue that the advantages of the feminist movement, particularly the second wave, are mostly limited to women of white, college education, and that the concerns of women of color, lesbians, immigrants and religious minorities have not been addressed by feminism. A post structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality became central, to much of the third wave's ideology. Third-wave feminists are known for focusing on "micro politics" and challenging the second-wave feminism model of what is and is not good for women. Internal discussions within third-wave feminism includes debates between feminists such as psychologist *Carol Gilligan*, who argues there are significant inequalities between the sexes and contends that gender roles are a result of social conditioning.

Theoretical approaches towards the gender paradigm

Social constructivism, a social learning theory developed by Russian psychologist *Lev Vygotsky*, posits that individuals are active participants in the creation of their own knowledge (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). It is an ontology that contains the fundamental idea that the world has a social foundation that suggests that the world is constructed socially. This is about how people perceive the world and differentiate between right and wrong. Gender performance is the first term used in the 1990 book *Gender Trouble* by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler. She argues that the birth of men or women does not determine one's conduct. In fact, people learn how to comply in certain ways with companionship or society. The idea of sex is an act or an event. It is possible to note that in the short movies, gender roles were built interestingly. Natural, dynamic and ever-changing is the concept of feminism. Infact, the contexts considered here are different ways of looking at it. Femininity is seen as representing women's behavioral expectations. It can also include the sexual appeal of women to men (Bazzini et.al.,2007).

Language is the main medium of interaction since it establishes meaning. The medium of language is made use of in cultures that normalize rape and sexual violence. Here, prevalent attitudes, norms, practices, and media normalize, excuse, tolerate, or even condone sexual violence. As a result, rape culture cultivates misogyny, protects assaulters, and blames victims for their own assault. According to Hall, neither the sender nor the receiver of meanings is owned by language. When shared language gives meaning and this is when it is represented. The discursive approach is another approach to the gender paradigm. Michael Foucault influenced this particular approach and it focuses on the production of knowledge and significance (Lind & Brzuzy, 2008).

Through social tyranny, society suppresses the choice of men and women in certain behavioral modes, characteristics of personality and occupational roles that the society considers to be fit. Thus the 'masculine' will have a chance to build their talents (Busby, 2005) and the 'female' will have a chance to do so. Indian films, for example, depict women as housekeepers who must bring enough family heirs. They also discourage women from working but encourage men who enjoy white collar jobs. They are capable and learned. This in turn dissuades women from proper education and therefore restricts their career choices to careers that do not require too much time outside the home of the family.

The Feminine in the light of the aforementioned short films

In Indian films women fit into old frames, representing them as sex objects and objects in order to meet men's desires. They are depicted as a bad mother in laws on mainstream platforms and servants wanting to stir trouble in the vicinity. They are blamed for their husband's death, not bearing a son, the upbringing of the child and even deemed "unlucky" when widowed. It is often noted that women are labelled names and considered weak when they resort to material favors from men.

A woman is subject to the "expectations" of society, family and man. In the short film *Maa*, we can see that both of the adolescent teenagers (Ammu and Hari) are equally guilty of the problems they cause (teenage pregnancy) but only one of them (Ammu) suffer the consequences. The film sheds light on the hardships that a woman and her family undergo during unintentional pregnancy. The mother of the girl who gets pregnant feels equally traumatized and confused. Being married to a highly conservative husband, she is immensely puzzled whether to let him in on the incident or hide it from him. Ammu's father represents the conservative society that will not tolerate a break in the laws and ideologies set by them. There is a scene in the film where Ammu's mother tells her about the right time to be pregnant. A woman doesn't even have the freedom to decide what to do with her body in such a culturally backward society. This film shows us how to effectively and efficiently deal with teenage

pregnancy. It also throws light upon the fact that even though both Ammu and her mother want to keep the baby, they decide unanimously to choose abortion as they see a live example of what could be Ammu in the future; if she decides to keep the baby, a life without a future for both Ammu and her child filled with poverty and hardships. The way in which teenage pregnancy affects Hari is totally different from how it affects Ammu. He is able to continue with his daily activities like nothing out of the ordinary happened while Ammu undergoes severe physical and physiological changes which affects her mentally, which finally brings her to tell her mother that she's pregnant. Towards the end of the film, we see that even though everything is back to normal, Ammu is hesitant to go back to her old life while Hari is just playing hockey with his friends like it's any other day. It is with her mother's support that she finally decides to overcome her past guilt and carry on with life.

The life of a typical Indian wife is presented who yearns to follow her dreams but cannot. She cooks, cleans, she cleans and she keeps an eye on the most immaterial needs of the family. He however, rests, eats, debates and criticizes women (*Juice* - His lady boss from work who wants an unnecessary email) all under the luxurious space of a cooler, not giving much attention to the basic conditions requested there at the kitchen. In 'Freedom at Midnight', the husband (Das) believes that he knows anything and everything about his wife (Chandra) and all the chores she is subject to. As portrayed in the short film, looking after his parents, children are all just part of being a "wife" and cannot be considered as a job or something that she should be appreciated for. When Chandra tells Das about her stranger fantasy, he totally flips out on her, telling her that she is his wife and his alone. But when she confronts Das about the virtual affair he has with his co-worker, he tries to defend himself by saying that this is something most married men do and that there is nothing wrong with it. His ideology is such that in a marriage, the wife is supposed to obey the husband and live according to his ideals. In the short film 'Maa', the girl's father looks down upon her athletic interests and tells her to go study for her exams. We see views being thrust upon the girl throughout the film. For instance the patriarchal figure says that "sports is not going to get her anywhere in life and that academics is something that determines her future, not sports." Her physique is greatly looked down upon by her father in this instance. In *Chhuri*, Sharad can't cope with the fact that the woman he's seeing in secret is also seeing other men. At the same time, he projects an aura of expectation onto his wife to comprehend his infidelity.

'Chhuri' as a short film investigates the standards set for man and woman in a marital relationship. Sharad being the husband, is having an extra marital affair with a younger and more attractive woman as he seems to be bored with his current relationship. Both the children of Meera (the wife) and Sharad seem to be aware of the affair but they only view their mother as the culprit for not confronting their father. This clearly brings out the double standards seen in the patriarchal society where a wife is held responsible for the mishaps of her husband. Meera decides to take a modern approach while confronting her husband's mistress. She tries to negotiate a deal with her on sharing time with Sharad as she doesn't want her kids to miss out on quality time with their father. Meera's hidden agenda is to make the mistress confess that she is seeing other men besides Sharad and it works. The funny but very realistic part of the film is towards the end when Meera leaves and Sharad judges his mistress for having another affair besides him thus representing the judgmental, hypocritical nature of man. Sharad finds it shameful that his mistress is seeing two or more men at a time when he himself is doing the same. Meera succeeds in ruining the extra marital relationship without much effort as she takes an intelligent approach by tapping into the patriarchal mindset of her husband.

The power which the patriarchy exhibits on the other is also outlined through a "fun" house party in *Juice*. In the get-together, men and women are separated on arrival with the men sitting together in the living room while the women are huddled in the heat-filled kitchen. Manju Singh, 'the housewife' is seen cleaning the half eaten chicken bones of her husband and friends. "Aap ko email se problem hai ya

female se,” is another context where they (men) all burst out in laughter in front of Manju, reflecting the internalized patriarchy. Nobody asks "her" for her opinions, because at the end of the day women are supposed to live a life of adjustment. In 'Freedom at Midnight', Chandra is a perfect amalgamation of a 21st-century woman stuck in a patriarchal household tied down by responsibilities of being a mother, wife, and a daughter-in-law. Her husband (Das) believes that he holds the key to his wife's freedom. He sees himself as a progressive husband who "grant's" his wife the freedom to do things that other men don't. He projects that in marriage the husband decides what his wife should do and should not. His wife wanting to seek sexual freedom angers Das and soon an argument between the couple leads to a revelation that can alter their marriage forever symbolized by the upma scene. Man is portrayed as the secondary in *Chhuri* because of the strong female lead, who resorts to an easy-going method to confront her husband's adultery.

It's not just men but women too who have normalized the power play existent in a common Indian household. For instance, in *Juice*; the women remark that a mother's life should revolve around her baby. Just because most have chosen a life devout to chores doesn't mean she should follow the same path too, asks another. A glass of juice here stands for the need for a patriarchal society to put itself in a woman's shoes. The husband doesn't even bother to help with the chores, for example; the multiple requests to fix the kitchen fan. 'Juice' is a source of the much needed break from the never ending work. Meera's daughter blames her for not standing up to her husband Sharad in *Churri*. Meera's pride as a woman is being stepped on by her own daughter for not confronting her husband about the infidelity he has committed. The short film *Maa*, highlights the need to coexist with norms. 'Go die' she says to her clueless daughter who confronts her about her teenage pregnancy. Although the main texts here are of the post feministic era, it shows traditional traits of representations associated with gender roles, some echoing a need for change.

Conclusion

Society has assigned different roles to the sexes, but these roles do not hold true for all individuals. However, a majority of people live in accordance with the said categorization. These gender roles can be a hindrance to men in general as they can limit the capabilities of what men and women can do. The assigned roles however, pose the power to actually enslave individuals as these can force them to be what others would want them to be.

As Bartky states, "We are born male and female but not masculine or feminine, femininity is an artifice, an achievement, a mode of enacting and re-enacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of flesh (Bartky, 1998:37)". The aforementioned view sums the production of femininity as either natural or voluntary. The impression is further amplified since "we live in a world that is stratified along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, and in which privileges, disadvantages and exclusion associated with such categories are unevenly distributed" states Gill (Gill, 2007: 1). This sentiment is shared by Lumby (1997: xii) when she asserts that the masses are always in need of guidance and easily swayed by media of which its structures and scope haven't served all groups in society equally well. Discipline thus is of the unequal sort with consciousness engendered by patriarchal ideology that subordinates women (Bartky 1998: 37). Women have internalized the effect of surveillance through self-discipline and against their own bodies, while men get off scot-free (Lumby, 1998:42). This self-discipline is a form of obedience to patriarchy that her body is designed to please or to excite (Lumby, 1998:43).

Media does play a vital role in imparting the notion of gender stereotypes onto the public. It has the power to influence an individual's take by the use of production and screenplay. The short films taken into consideration showcase a patriarchal milieu wherein women are deemed as secondary to the

masculine. The notion of the present 'women question' is catered to with the use of strong independent feminine figures in the works. These however, succumb to the evident gender power structure; for instance' the secret abortion in *Maa* without the knowledge of the patriarch and the revelation which can serious damage to Chandra's marriage in *Freedom at Midnight*. It is interesting to note that there are numerous gender biased delineations in films to which the majority will concur to. Therefore, 'Gender', one among the many themes used in visual contexts, should be approached with caution.

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