FEMALE-CENTRIC FILMS IN INDIA: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

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Abstract: Female-centric films in India: A feminist critique: The film industry, which is a male-dominated field, has always had a handful of films with women in the lead roles, right from the very popular film Mother India, which depicted the ideal woman and mother on the big screen. In the 21st century, the Indian silver screen has seen an increase in the number of films that have a female lead. The idea that a woman is the star of the film is often seen as an achievement in itself in the Bollywood film industry. Just because the film has a female protagonist does not mean that film positively depicts women or that it question the traditional gender roles. When analyzed closely, what can be seen is a nuanced interplay between the forces of patriarchy and an attempt to break free of these very forces. Some end up reinforcing the gender norms in a subtle manner whereas others posit new possibilities for freeing women.
How are these films with a female lead different from the male-centered films that trap women in certain gendered ideological constructs? How do these films construct the subject of a woman? How is masculinity constructed in these films? Do they just inverse gender roles by picturing women in roles that are stereotypically male? What kind of an agency does the woman have in the film? Are they active or passive? To what extent are they active? To what extent does the film resist/subvert patriarchy? This paper will subject some of the female-centric films that were celebrated as victory for feminism (released in the last five years) to see the extent to which they are truly feminist and empowering. The films that will be analyzed include *Pink, Dear Zindagi, English Vinglish, Jai Gangajal, Neerja* and *Queen*.

Keywords: gender, stereotypes, femininity, masculinity, films.

Introduction: Female-centric films in India: A feminist critique: Popular culture and films in particular are sites of representation where the subject and object positions are created and changed to suit the needs of the times. The film industry, which is a male-dominated field, has always had a handful of films with women in the lead roles, right from the very popular film Mother India, which depicted the ideal woman and mother on the big screen. In the 21st century, the Indian silver screen has seen an increase in the number of films that have a female lead. Some of the films that belong to this category (and garnered acclaim for their feminist stance) include *Pink, Dear Zindagi, English Vinglish, Jai Gangajal, Neerja* and *Queen*. These films were touted as a new hope for feminism in India.
Films with a male lead often construct an ideological image of women and trap them within certain roles and stereotypes. So when a film with a female lead appears, the assumption is that such stereotypes will also disappear. But this is far from true. The idea that a woman is the star of the film is often seen as an achievement in itself. Just because the film has a female protagonist does not mean that film positively depicts women or that it questions the traditional gender roles. When analyzed closely, what can be seen is a nuanced interplay between the forces of patriarchy and an attempt to break free of these very forces. Some end up reinforcing the gender norms in a subtle manner whereas others posit new possibilities for freeing women. This paper will subject some of the recent box office hits that were female-centric to get answers to the following question: Are these films any different in its approach to gender when compared to the films with a male lead? How do these films construct the subject of a woman? How is masculinity constructed in these films? Do they just inverse gender roles by picturing women in roles that are stereotypically male? What kind of an agency does the woman have in the film? Are they active or passive? To what extent are they active? To what extent does the film resist/subvert patriarchy?
In a society where rape victims are accused of 'asking for it', based on the clothes they wear and their social friendliness, a film like *Pink* which deals with the idea of consent/sexual consent gains weight. The opening scene sets the tone for the rest of the narrative where women are blamed for inciting provocation from the men despite the fact that they are the survivors. This shows the recriminations that a woman has to face when she decides to live life without paying heed to the society's constructs about gender.The film talks about how it is necessary to get consent even when the woman in question is a sex worker. It deals with the questions of virginity, chastity and the necessity of giving the woman the right to her own body in a society like India which does not give sexual agency to women. Despite dealing with such issues in a bold manner, it is striking how the film industry has relied on the hero Amitabh Bachchan to execute the role of the lawyer instead of getting a renowned actress in is

stead. A closer look will reveal how the film in a sense is a subtle re-working of the knight on the white horse saving the damsels in distress. Or can he be seen as the feminist?

A lot of people seem to think that feminism is about male-bashing and that it excludes men from the discourse (Hannam 67). But in truth, feminists recognize that patriarchy is created and sustained by men as well as women and that for the system to change, people of all genders need to be part of the conversation. Amitabh as the lawyer Deepak Sehgal is a man who does not believe in imposing his world view on a woman, does not believe in marital rape, and believes in the idea of sexual consent and so on. It is possible that a man too can be a true feminist but the sexism involved in using Amitabh as the lawyer is quite obvious from the posters: the promotional posters all have a giant mug shot of Amitabh and the women, the so-called leads in the film, are tucked away in the background! The politics of having a man question patriarchy under the assumption that it is always more effective than having a woman do it, contradicts the very idea that the film is trying to promote. The film was also a failure when it came to its attitude towards sex work associating the act with exclusion and shame. *Dear Zindagi* also has an independent and sexually empowered woman Kaira (played by Alia Bhatt) as the lead, who faces problems in her life due to her non-conformity to the gendered notions as to what a girl should be like. She leads an independent life away from her family who does not accept her job or her way of life, she is a cinematographer who speaks her mind, who has an active sex life, who drinks and has fun and is rude to her family. In other words she is the complete opposite of the ideal Indian 'bahu' (daughter-in-law). The film portrays issues that every career woman has encountered; even when women achieve something in life through their own effort, they are constantly required to prove their worth to everyone around them, as opposed to the men who are not required to do that. There is a scene where Kaira's love interest, Raghu (Kunal Kapoor), while offering her a project in New York, says that he approached her because he found her hot and later clarifies it as a joke. But such sexist jokes in a work environment makes one wonder if that is how the patriarchal mindsets make men perceive of women despite their achievements (Connell 97).

The film also focuses on the slut shaming that happens when a woman has had multiple sexual partners but dismisses such an attitude towards the subject; taking a positive attitude towards it. In the beginning, Kaira is looking for validation (in a scene she ties up her hair because Raghu tells her to), but she takes things into her own hands by the end and she is comfortable with being herself as is evident from the fact that all her past boyfriends get invited for the screening. The best part about Dear Zindagi is that Kaira's life does not revolve around her boyfriends. When her therapist asks her to name the people closest to her, Kaira names two of her female friends, her brother, and her house-help. Just like Deepak Sehgal guides the three women in *Pink*, Kaira too has a man who helps her in her situation; Dr Jehangir Khan, her therapist. But unlike Sehgal, Khan has lighter speeches, and does not take the attention away from the female lead and her issues. *English-Vinglish*, explores the issue of women's role in a society still suffering from the colonial mindset where people's worth is judged on the base of their proficiency in English. The protagonist is a woman, Shashi Godbole, the ideal India housewife who doesn't question the patriarchal system that she was born and brought up in. despite the fact that her husband and daughter constantly demean her for her lack of proficiency in English, she accepts that her husband Satish expects her to do all the household chores by day and satisfy him sexually at night. She never falters in her duty as a wife or mother.

The decision to learn English, which is the result of Shashi taking control of her life, an empowering part of the film, loses its power at the end when she makes a speech about family values that reinforces all the gendered values that she was brought up in. The idea of the female sexuality beyond the realm of marriage is not explored; especially in respect to the nature of her feelings towards Laurent (the French man who falls in love with her). At the end of the film, Shashi's role does not change nor does she change as a person. She is still the same housewife and a doting mother – although one who can now speak English. The film posits the idea that women need to be better educated and they should be accepted in the society but they should at the same time be fulfilling their traditional roles. The film *Jai Gangajal* presents a female character in a role that was traditionally played by men, that of a police officer. Abha is a woman, and the Superintendent of Police of a conservative region. It shows Abha walking around dressed in men's clothes; which is a inversion of gender at the most superficial level. The biggest flaw is its token feminism. By presenting a glamorous leading actress in the role of a police officer, the film gives the idea that it is liberal on the gender front. Yet, *Jai Gangaajal* casually throws up dialogues about men being eunuchs/neutered if they are not empowered or courageous. In a later scene, Abha herself uses the word *naamard* (unmanly) for a man she views with contempt. This is what happens when you make an apparently feminist move, not out of conviction but because feminism is the fad of the day and faking it happens to be the latest social trend.

The film also endorses the stereotypical notions of masculinity. At one point, when a junior sees Abha taking on Babloo's goons for the first time, he too feels the urge to bash up some villains because that's what 'real men' do. The screen time allotted to the actress is limited. This coupled with the fact that there is no depth to her characterization just goes to show that making her the lead had more to do catering to the current fad of feminism than actually creating a film that disrupts traditional gender expectations. This film has a lot in similar with films like Ki and Ka which operated on the faulty assumption that feminism is about reversing the gender roles and making a man the dominated partner in the relationship. The emancipated Indian woman as mean and spiteful and the man who does not stand up for his ambitions is portrayed as a spineless person. Such films fail to communicate or even understand what feminism and gender equality is truly about.

The film *Neerja* has all the elements that would call for a feminist study; it has an alleged dowry torture by Indian husband in a foreign land, the wife not getting respect in her family because of dowry, a broken marriage, woman's expression of choice of job and the deadliest one – three pilots leaving 300 passengers and crew members in a situation of emergency to force a woman die. But the film does have certain empowering aspects; like the fact that after her first break up, her family not only accepted her but also didn't force a new guy on her. She was made to choose her own life ahead. But the film is not about feminism per se. It's the story of a person who just did their job right and went beyond the call of duty when she really needed to.

The film *Queen*, starts at a point where Indian society believes that a woman's life has lost its worth; at the altar where the bride-to-be has been deserted by the prospective groom. The film mocks the traditional belief of how a girl's life is over if she's left at the altar. In the case of Rani Mehra, that is where her life starts. She sets out on her honeymoon alone, which turns out to be a road to self-discovery and happiness.

It has characters like Vijayalakshmi, an unapologetic single mom, a free spirit who's strong enough to fend for herself and her child. Vijaylakshmi, in any other Bollywood film would have been the vamp, or at least a character with some shades of grey, but *Queen* tears through superficial social brandings. It doesn't degrade her to the level of a sexually available woman. She becomes a friend to Rani and they explore the city together. Unlike other Bollywood films which show women fighting over the same guy, this friendship passed the Bechdel test. The Bechdel test was introduced by Allison Bechdel and it considers whether a movie satisfies the following requirements: 1) The movie has at least two women in it; 2) who talk to each other; and 3) about something besides a man (Murphy 124). The film also humanized the sex-worker through the character of Roxette. They're either shown as the downtrodden victims or the outright bitch; but Roxette is depicted as a normal human being who has problems and issues just like others.It also demolished the stereotype of 'macho' men. Through the "lizard-scare" scene (the men's fear of reptiles), the film showed how even men can have irrational fears, can be sensitive and have emotional moments too. One of the most significant aspects of the film is that Rani is not tied to any romantic relationship at the end, which is a move in the right direction. The happy ending wasn't a multi-crore shaadi but a woman finding happiness through self-discovery.

The analysis proves that just because a woman is depicted as the lead in a film does not mean that the patriarchal mindset or gendered stereotypes are absent. What these films offer at best is an inter play between the forces of domination and subversion. Films with female protagonists cannot be counted as a victory in the fight against gender inequality. It is just one of the starting points and not the end.

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