

ENGLISH VINGLISH: A KALEIDOSCOPIC VISION OF OPPRESSION OF WOMEN AND OBSESSION OF SPEAKING ENGLISH

MADHUBANTI GUPTA

NARULA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY,
WEST BENGAL, INDIA.

Abstract

The role of women in collective Indian psyche is an endless source of debates and discussions. Nevertheless, there is a yawning gap between perception and reality when it comes to the global image of Indian women in the 21st century. Cinema as a popular and unique genre of literature always reflects the society and its deliberations. We have witnessed gradual metamorphosis of Indian women portrayed in mainstream Bollywood movies - from the iconic Mother India to the latest blockbusters like Mardani, Queen, NH 10 and many more. But to see the women through the eyes of another woman is completely different. In this context this paper seeks to question the portrayal of women in Indian movies with reference to Gauri Shinde's (directorial) debut English Vinglish. Though a main stream Bollywood movie, it attempts to explore the true predicament of common Indian women within its subtle layers. English Vinglish revolves around two distinct themes intrinsically woven together: the challenge confronted by the protagonist of the film Shashi, an ordinary Indian woman to balance between her different roles and facing disrespect for not being conversant in English. English, a language which the British Colonial masters have left as their legacy endangers Shashi's image and self – respect. The obsession of her family and the society she belongs to for English as a status symbol turns out to be a threat for her. We learn from the story how she conquers the fear of speaking English and commands respect from all around her. This paper strives to bring out general perception about women, their plight and struggle, their potential to emerge as the triumphant one and also how learning English as a second language becomes instrumental in Shashi's Phoenix-like rise with help and instances from the movie English Vinglish.

Keywords: Women, Oppression, Indian Cinema, Communication, English, Post Colonialism.

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Introduction:

The last few decades have witnessed a rapid transformation in Indian women. The change is obvious in all walks of their life. The Indian women are no longer the socio-economic prisoner leading a life of subjugation bound by their domestic obligations. They have come out of the shadows of their male counterparts with confidence. Of course time has changed, the societal values have changed, with which changed the need of the hour for Indian woman to face the world in her own terms. However, it remains to be seen whether our overall outlook towards women have really changed or the male domination continues to rule the roost in its different facades and facets.

In the recent past the Indian Film Industry as a whole have moved away from the Bollywood stereotypes; the mushy storyline, group dance, singing and dancing around the trees. The directors have presented to the audience a range of versatile themes and many untold stories that have been till date kept as a taboo. And in this revolutionary change we cannot but acknowledge the contribution of the feminist directors of our country like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi, Gurinder Chadha and many more. The hard-hitting topics like domestic violence, atrocities on women, women trafficking, honour killing, suppressed sexuality, conditions of Indian widows, rights of women have been vividly dealt by stalwart filmmakers. Even the new generation directors are pacing up with women centric movies where the beautiful female leads do not need a muscular hero to be their bodyguard. Latest movies like No One Killed Jessica, Kahaani, Mardani, NH10 and Drishyam are some of the additions to this clan; but luring the masses who are basically the audience of the mainstream commercial films is a different ball game.

Herein lies Gauri Shindhe's uniqueness. Her directorial debut English Vinglish takes the audience to the world of an ordinary Indian housewife Shashi and makes them the witness of her extraordinary journey in which she overcomes all the obstacles and eventually comes out as the winner. The issues like oppression of women, their real plight in their own family, and also the post colonial discrimination on the basis of English language literacy are so subtly touched upon in this film that it proved to be a highly acclaimed one by critics [8-10] and was also able to win the hearts of millions of Indians.

The Backdrop and the Theme of Oppression on Women

Shashi, the protagonist of the film is seen to be very happy in her daily life. Her life centres round her husband Satish and her children. She plays all the conventional roles: that of a devoted mother, of a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law who accomplishes all the responsibilities from cooking to raising her children perfectly. But in between her days work she hardly finds any time for herself. As a part of a male dominating society Shashi never questions any offensive behaviour she receives either from her husband or from her daughter. She accepts submissively her husband's expectations that she will wake up early in the morning to do all the household chores from making breakfast to make her children ready and after the whole day's hard work she will be equally willing to warm her husband's bed. She is continuously and openly criticised by her daughter and husband for not knowing how to speak English. The only individuality that she can express is her culinary proficiency by operating a small scale business of making and selling an Indian sweet called 'Laddoo.' This is the only thing she is appreciated for.



Satish though does not pay any attention to Shashi's success or appreciation that she receives for preparing such excellent sweets. He never becomes a part of her glory. When Shashi enthusiastically wants to share her happiness about the business, Satish tersely replies 'I'm busy right now...can we talk later please?' [6]. Not only this indifference at some point of time Satish asks Shashi to stop her business: 'Shashi...you should stop making those Ladoos vadoos..' [6]. to which Shashi feebly attempts to defend herself: 'I have just one passion...you want me to give that up too' [6]. Satish's response: 'Only I should eat your food...why should others enjoy it?' [6] reflects the prejudice of patriarchal society that wives are the possession of their husbands.

Are not these women oppression typical of all Indian societies where women are expected to sacrifice their dreams, their passions and ambitions for the whimsicality of their husbands, in-laws or for their family, as if giving up one's career or passion has never been an extraordinary task for a woman. Such sacrifices, being so commonly practised by our women folk, now not at all treated as a coercive action.

The Obsession of English as the Symbol of Elitism

With this theme of oppression of women Gauri Shinde weaves very artistically another theme that is obsession of speaking English. Here the lens of kaleidoscope starts turning and with changing design the different facades of oppression is shown.



Husband's indifference or his disapproval of her individual venture was not so much painful for Shashi. It is taken for granted that husbands have got the rights to dictate their terms as the head of the family. Shashi was no exception to the common women. She was contented with her lot. She is flawless in her duties as a mother and wife. But according to her family members her only drawback is her lack of knowledge of English language. Shashi gets continuously humiliated at every turn for not knowing English. Especially Satish openly teases Shashi for her linguistic incompetence. Sapna's (Shashi's Daughter) repetitive reminder of Shashi's limitations of English communication sometimes seems too rude. Even Shashi's little son Sagar takes part in it. For instances from the movie: 'Mom it is not jhaaaz dance ..it is jazz dance' [6].

With this incessant harping on the same fact, it becomes a not so secret thing of shame for Shashi. But when she reprimands her daughter Sapna for not studying at home, Sapna deliberately taunts her by saying: 'You think you can teach me...English Literature?' [6].



The tension intensifies when Sapna discovers that Satish cannot attend the Parent Teacher Meet of her School. Instead Shashi is to accompany her daughter. Sapna's fear of getting embarrassed in front of her friends and school authorities for her mom's minimal knowledge of English forces her to yell like anything. Even she gets ready to tell the lie that her mom is ill. She underestimates Shashi and insults her by saying: 'Do you even know what PTA means?' [6]. Sapna feels immensely uncomfortable before her friend's mother and class teacher to present Shashi. In this context the young director and storywriter has shown us how still in this era of decolonization the legacy of speaking English creates difference among us. Indian people fought with their all might to get the freedom from the British but got shackled in British divide and rule policy in which only a language played the most pivotal role. English Language has been able to divide Indian society in two linguistic communities: one who can speak in English and the others who cannot. Speaking English has become the symbol of cultural elitism. Here, the word 'culture' (notably one of whose most important components is 'communication') has been used in the sense as described in Edward Said's words

'..."culture" means two things in particular. First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure.' (Edmund Said, pg xii)

To understand the pertinence of this scenario one can stride back to Indian History to find that how the British imperialism that entered the Indian soil in the disguise of merchants and fraudulently seized the power of monarchy to exploit our motherland as one of their colonies. The British invaders not only invaded the geographical territories of India but also the Indian psyche. Consequently the two hundred years of subjugation has resulted into cultural servility. In the name of intellectual uplifting of the 'natives' the colonial masters were able to sow the seeds of hatred among its own community on the basis of borrowed British culture. Those who could adopt this artificial culture were treated as the cream of the crop and others as the backward and not so presentable in their own society. The underlined conflict that emerges out of these conditions gives birth to the two linguistic communities. One that enjoys the superiority and feels that they have got the right to (if not intentionally) correct others or make fun of them for their linguistic shortcomings. The other community naturally suffers from the inferiority complex and feels themselves cornered and a misfit in the so-called aristocratic society. The set parameters of that so-called society force Sapna to refuse to take Shashi at the parent

teacher meeting. Her disgraceful behaviour and unwillingness to acknowledge Shashi as her parent reminds us of Pip, the protagonist of Charles Dickens' 'Great Expectations', who ventures to be a 'London gentleman' in vain. Pip believed that he was helped by an elderly woman named Mrs. Havisham. In reality his actual patron turns out to be Abel Magwitch, a condemned convict whom he once helped. Again, when Pip's unknown benefactor reappears he feels rather hesitant to welcome him 'because everything about the man reeks of delinquency and unpleasantness.' (Edward Said, pg xiv)

Similarly in the movie in context, the purported idea of cultural elitism has become so deep-rooted that even a daughter fails to behave respectfully with her mother. Instead of coming out of the shadow of the colonial masters the Indians fall prey to their glitterati and also to 'la mission civilisatrice' [The Mission Civilisatrice (1890-1945)][4]. They decide to make themselves the proverbial crow with peacock's feather forgetting the well known moral of Aesop's fable 'The Crow and the Peacock': 'It's foolish to try and be what you're not. Learn to love the feathers you've got!' [5]

We cannot forget that Shashi lives in a society where all the important talks happen only in English. When Shashi asks her husband the reason behind marrying a not so educated girl like her, Satish admits that it is her physical beauty that hooked him. Satish is the prototype of those men who prefers physical bonding over sharing feelings or emotions. He overlooks Shashi's emotional need of a friend with whom she can share her feelings. Shashi in dejection retorts 'Talking to me is not important right? Oh I forget...' 'important talks' happen only in English' [6] and Satish thinks 'Why waste time talking?' [6]. So without wasting time Satish enjoys his marital rights of sexuality that is even on his own terms ignoring the fact that Shashi is too fatigued after the day's hard work.



The kaleidoscope keeps turning. The sets of colourful plots now shape another vibrant design. The setting changes from India to abroad. Shashi has to go, all alone, to New York to help her sister for the marriage ceremony of her niece. After getting humiliated for her vain attempts to communicate in the foreign country she once noticed a billboard on bus advertising for an English course that guarantees fluency within four weeks. Shashi

makes up her mind to join the class. There Shashi gets the exposure to a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment where all the people comes from different strata with only one common interest to learn the English as the language that has become a global lingua franca. As time passes Shashi gets friendly with everybody. One of her classmate Lauren, a very sensible French man, falls in love with her. Rest of the English class sequences invariably remind us of the serial aired on BBC 'Mind Your Language' and it's famous Hindi adaptation of Pankaj Kapoor's 'Zabaan Sambhalke'. In the very first class Shashi realizes the glory of her being an entrepreneur. By looking back viewers can remember the harsh comment of Satish: 'Sagar: I can go with mummy, Satish: Fine... you'll be thrown out of school...you can sit at home and make Ladoos' [6].



The brief stay in abroad bestows Shashi with a multiple life-education lessons. Once when Sapna shouts at her for not finding her scrapbook, Shashi helps her and tries to explain the reason that she kept it there so that no one can read it .Even she did not read that. Sapna does not leave this opportunity to tease her about her only weakness. 'That's because you can't read...' [6]. Hearing this Shashi breaks down in anger and for the first time opens her heart about the never-ending bullying: 'What right do children have.....to treat their parents like this? They don't even know the meaning of respect!' [6]. Shashi's emotional outburst touches finer chords of numerous hearts:

'Am I a trash can.....to dump in whatever they feel like? What kind of a relationship is this? We do our best to make them happy...and how easily they hurt you in return....taking advantage of our weakness...You can teach everything...but how do you teach someone...to be sensitive to others?' [6].

Let us not forget the Kaleidoscope that has already enthralled the spectator with its magical patterns. It turns once again to exhibit another unknown aspect of Shashi's character; the unseen or may be overlooked facets of till date underestimated homemaker. Apparently not so educated Shashi surprises everybody with her sense and sensibility. In

the English class one day the students indulge themselves in gossip about their instructor's break-ups and his being a gay guy. Shashi compassionately supports him and also homosexuality. This sensibility is really unexpected from a commonplace housewife like Shashi.

'No making fun...We are all different from each other... For you...David Sir may not be 'normal'...for David Sir...you may not be 'normal'...but feelings are all the same...and pain is pain...' [6].

Rise of the Phoenix

The constant humiliation from her family helps Shashi to tighten her jaws and also strengthens her determination to show the world her capabilities. Away from her family, away from the native land and away from her mundane daily duties Shashi for the first time gets the time to spare for herself only. She starts thinking about herself. She learns to reflect and to listen to her heart's content. While learning interpersonal communication she also learns the 'intrapersonal communication' (Minakshi Raman, pg 10). The introspection transforms her into a new personality. The beautiful background score aptly hints at the transition of an ordinary, submissive housewife to a confident, carefree and a determined one:



'What a feeling! / I walk carefree! / Don't ask me to stop / Just let me go on/I have no fear / I have no worry / I hope I don't lose my way / If I do...may the road find me! / Don't make me stop! / I've changed my point of view / Everything around is new / ... Extraordinary! / This passion!/ Morning noon!/ Extraordinary!/ This passion!' [6].

As the time of wedding nears Shashi is seen busy with the arrangement of the ceremony, making laddoos and at the same time regularly attending her English classes. Meanwhile, Satish and the children reach Manhattan to attend the marriage. Once again Shashi is insulted by Satish who says '...you were born to make Ladoos!' [6]. At this point someone is found for the first time to support Shashi and that is her niece Radha who assures: 'Aunty...you were not born only to make Ladoos' [6].

To compare English Vinglish with the contemporary movies we find the themes of strong woman who fights for her own cause in vogue. They are not confined to the age old ideas of sticking to the married life which is on the verge of breaking down. In 'Hamari Adhuri Kahani', Vasudha the protagonist defies the fake sacrifice of her husband. She dares to walk out of her marriage without being afraid of any tradition or boundary and decides to wait for her dead lover to be united in the life after death. Though Shashi finds a friend in Lauren, she does not reciprocate his love. Unlike Vasudha, Shashi does not want a new life partner but want a new life with her old family as a member with regained esteem.



The Kaleidoscope is on work! Looking through it, we can transcend ourselves to the enchanted fairy land where the princess triumphs over all the impediments and attains the happy ending. The director introduces the fairytale allegory of Cinderella. In the fairy tale Cinderella shrugs off cinders and with magic touch of fairy god mother becomes the beautiful princess and walks out in moonlit night to win the heart of her Prince Charming. Shashi's case is a different one. Her mission is not to find the true love in someone else but to love herself and to be respected. She confesses to her niece that she does not need love but what she really need is some respect.

The learning of English here becomes the magic wand with which she becomes the Cinderella on her own terms. Shashi surprises her family members and the assembled guests with her short speech on marriage fully in English just like Cinderella astonished everyone in the Royal Castle with her charming beauty and vivacious performance. With her brief but lucid speech Shashi imparts an important lesson to the world that married couple should help each other to feel equal.



'Sometimes...married couple don't even know how the other is feeling.... It means marriage is finished? /No That is the time you have to help yourself / Nobody can help you better than you./ If you do that...you will return back feeling equal. /Your friendship will return back...your life will be beautiful/.....Family...never be judgemental!' [6].



Conclusion

A lesson indeed! This self-explanatory speech is at first a lesson to the male dominating society to tell them if women are not superior to them they are not inferior also and definitely at par. On the other hand it is a tight slap on the chauvinist ego of her husband. Satish realizes his mistakes and regretfully asks if she still loves him. Our fairy tale advances towards the happy ending hinting at the reunion of lead pair. Shashi emerges triumphantly earning respect from all around her as a doting mother and loving wife.



Like a phoenix, from the queen of hearth Shashi evolves to be the queen of millions hearts. English Vinglish truly turns to be a vivid kaleidoscopic vision where the oppression of women and obsession for English merge in an intrinsic pattern leaving scopes for more debates and discussions for the eons to come.

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