

FEMINIST STANCE IN THE MOVIES OF MADHUR BHANDARKAR: A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FASHION AND CORPORATE

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Abstract

Indian Women have excelled in every field and have engraved their names across the globe, but there still seems to be a long route ahead before she attains equal status in the minds of Indian men. In the patriarchal Indian society, even the cinematic world most commonly referred to as Bollywood deems to project women as an auxiliary or an appendage. It may be a good thing as films have mass appeal and at least some if not all carry out a message to the public and try to create awareness. The very recent statement made by one of the divas of Bollywood, Kangana Ranaut is stunning where she says it is the hero who decides who would be cast opposite him and not the actress. There is a myth that women are characterized in films to propel the male role rather than characterize them as the one who keeps the narrative structure sinuous. Women in Indian cinema are born with certain assumptions ranging from cult movies to celluloid blockbusters like Sholay to more recent Fashion that employ themselves as in severe gender issues. They are portrayed either as damsels in distress or demented feminists or simple belly-shaking glam dolls whose sole ambition is to attract the attention of the male gender. In many Indian films it is a common trend to insert 'item numbers' which bear no rational connection to the film in anyways but with an assumption that the film is easily associated. Occasionally, do we see a female being the protagonist of a film than merely being objects of sexual desire. In some cases there appears to be a clash between 'modern feminism' and 'traditional values'. Indian cinema often acts like an emotional register and is very resourceful while reading the characterization of 'Women'

*Many directors have attempted women oriented movies and Madhur Bhandarkar is one of them. He has made many movies whether it is Chandni Bar, or Corporate or Fashion or Heroine. Women have played the central roles in all of his movies and he has given a new direction and has brought out a drastic change in characterization of women. My paper would basically highlight on the following points: **Portrayal of women in Bollywood, Changing faces of characterization of women in Bollywood, Analysis of Fashion and Corporate, Comparison between the characters of the two movies and Conclusion***

Keywords: cinema, Bollywood, women, feminism

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Portrayal of women in Bollywood:

Women in Indian cinema are born with certain assumptions ranging from cult movies to celluloid blockbusters like *Sholay* to more recent *Dhoom3* that find themselves in severe gender issues. They are portrayed either as damsels in distress or demented feminists or simple belly-shaking glam dolls whose sole ambition is to attract the attention of the male gender. In many Indian films it is a common trend to insert 'item numbers' which bear no rational connection to the film in anyways but with an assumption that the film is easily associated. As Bindu Nair(2009:53)says, 'Sometimes the one song ends up making the film a hit, such as 'ChammaChamma' from the film China gate.'

Occasionally, do we see a female being the protagonist of a film than merely being objects of sexual desire. In some cases there appears to be a clash between 'modern feminism' and 'traditional values'. Indian cinema often acts like an emotional register and is very resourceful while reading the characterization of 'Women'.

Women in India were not expected to express their feelings or to develop their personalities rather get accustomed to their individual subjugation and succumb to the same. To use a women character in a film is to represent a traditional figure as a symbolic image but many a times it is a mere wishful desire.

The films that focus on women protagonists showcase their search for self through their bodies. This is quite outstanding in the film *Chandni bar*. Mumtaz character played by Tabu the protagonist is forcefully sent by her maternal uncle to be a show girl in a dance bar. Her major source of income was from performing in the dance bar. She would maximum need to groove her body to the music and there would be scores of men willing to shed their money on her for the very own reason - voyeuristic desires. This woman's body is given the penultimate magnitude in many of the films we see. And in these films the act tends to start with a rebellious nature and the instrument being their body. As Jasbir Jain (2009: 121) has observed,

Rebel women are portrayed with ridicule and comedy. Rebelliousness need not always be conclusive or even approved within the narrative structure. At times it may be part of the discourse on modernity and perceived as a potential threat to patriarchy through the values of education/westernization/independence.

A female protagonist who is shown to be wronged in the society and due to this suffers a great deal in life. In other words, she is said to be victimized who endure the consequences. If

one notices it is always the female who bears the brunt of all the misfortunes. Possibly owing this to their beauty and morality they are able to capture the hearts of the men. But this seems to be taken for granted by the men.

Now, having discussed about how women are portrayed and the penalties they pay in return are a myriad when it comes to how men are showcased. Although to digress a little from the centre of discussion, it would be interesting to see how men would react if there was a reverse of these situations. But what really happens in this case is that the men do not like to be treated as anything below their dignity even if it was unintentional. As Anshoo Sharma (2009: 114) has rightly said, 'They vent their anger, shun the women, and make them feel guilty. They are never shown to be in a compromising position -groveling or pleading with their women.'

Changing faces of characterization of women in Bollywood: There are instances where women have come out of their general conventional roles and have won accolades and fame from the audience as well as critics. Some memorable roles played by women are the following:

Preity Zinta as Preet Oberoi in *Sangharsh*

Whenever there is a mention of *Sangharsh* a very idea comes to our mind that it is a film which had strong female characters in Bollywood. It was released in 1999 which had Akshay Kumar as the male lead. It was directed by Tanuja Chandra and Preity Zinta had tasted success with *Dushman* and *Soldier* respectively. The film was essentially promoted as a Zinta film just like *Dushman* as a Kajol film..

The film was inspired by *Silence of the Lambs* where the protagonist Clarice Starling is a little nervous, but a confident and intelligent FBI officer. Preity Zinta's Preet, on the other hand, was more hysterical in the remake *Sangharsh*. Her histrionics, intense fear of the unknown and absence of personality needed for a CBI officer puts a question mark over her ability to track a serial killer as menacing as Lajja Shankar. Then, for no apparent reason, she lets Kumar take over the proceedings as the hero towards the end while Zinta is relegated to the job of screaming and running. The original had a scintillating climax as Jodie Foster's Clarice takes on Buffalo Bill, the chief antagonist, single handedly.

Karisma Kapoor as Nandini in *Shakti: The Power*

This movie is considered as one of the best films of Karisma Kapoor though it could not do any wonders in the box office. It is true that this role of a mother trapped in hostile conditions with her son had some firepower. There are sequences in the film where Karisma's Nandini shows some courage as she takes stand against her father-in-law and his goons. However the climax robs the sheen off this character as in a typical Bollywood way, the unlikely male characters become the saviours.

Here too Nandini, in the end, turn out to be a kind of damsel in distress as initially it is Shahrukh Khan's character which saves her from the goons and then Nana Patekar's character suddenly mellows and he lets her go at the airport. A woman is yet again reduced to the mercy

of men around her. The male antagonist redeems himself and the female protagonist survives due to this redemption, which in part has been brought by her, but the filmmaker forgets to acknowledge it.

ShilpaShetty's role as Shikha in *Life in a ... Metro*

Life in a ...Metro is a subtle movie where the director AnuragBasu gave depth and intricacy to the more difficult story of Nafisa Ali and Dharmendra and at the same time did justice to the role of ShilpaShetty. It was a great year for Shilpa. The Big Brother row brought her into limelight from obscurity. Then she won it and the critical as well as commercial success of *Life in a ...Metro* brought more laurels for her. Shetty plays the role of a typical homemaker, a doting wife and a caring mother whose domestic life is a mess. Her husband, however, cheats on her and misbehaves. Then she finds herself in love with a man who truly understands her, but instead of holding his hand, she prefers returning to her husband. We keep on wondering but are not able to find a solid reason behind this decision of hers. What makes it look worse is that almost all the other characters in the movie have been dealt with more deftly and are far more progressive in their approach. Shetty's acting is praiseworthy and she certainly did justice to her role

VidyaBalan's Silk Smitha in *The Dirty Picture*

Hollywood has produced a lot of films on the lives of (sometimes tragic) controversial female celebrities like Gia, Frida etc. Bollywood, on the other hand, has mostly kept its distance from any such subject matter. *The Dirty Picture*, a film loosely based on the life of South Indian sex siren Silk Smitha, is one of the few attempts in this sub genre. The film won many awards including the National award for best acting by VidyaBalan. The script may be crisp and Balan's performance was beyond excellence..

KareenaKapoor as MahiArora in *Heroine*

The film is directed by MadhurBhandarkar and the coveted role of Mahi was supposed to be done by Aishwariya who had to refuse on pregnancy grounds. This was the story of the actresses over the world the world. Kareena'sMahi has got negativity all around her. Bhandarkar had clearly no idea how to shape Mahi's character. She is ambitious and yet she longs for love at the same time.

Analysis of *Fashion and Corporate*:

MadhurBhandarkar'scinema is associated with granular realism. He falls into the brigade of contemporary Hindi film-makers who have filmed real time issues and have been appreciated for the same. He has also been the recipient of many National Film Awards for his work on social issues. His films have deal with bold and unconventional themes like exploitation of women, cycle of poverty, organized crime, police and govt. corruption, cult of celebrity and journalism, ruthlessness of big business and industrial espionage.He prefers to portray women as protagonist. The women in *Bhandarkar's*films are usually shown as bold and empowered

women who lead life on their own terms, take their own decisions, are rebels who do not conform to social norms and excel in their respective professions. A very positive portrayal of an independent leading lady characterizes the initial reels of his films. However, through the progress of the film mid-way, there is a downslide in the protagonist's assertion and she slowly gets inclined to fit in the society's mould. In the end, she either has to fit in the norm or end up as a sufferer. There is a subtle reinforcement of the very value system that the film critiques at its outset. His films have been disparaged for being too judgmental by giving lessons on morality to the viewer.

Bhandarkar is believed to have included his own controversial rape case in the film's script anticipating all the angry responses from those who're likely to recognise themselves or facets of their personalities in his characters. The film's script reveals that the filmmaker has shown how a "desperate woman will go to any length to pull down a successful man, including framing him for assault or rape". So while he may have sportingly exploited his own life for the screen, Bhandarkar has cleverly portrayed himself as a victim, not perpetrator.

Corporate portrays the story of *Nishigandha Dasgupta* or Nishi played by Bipasha Basu who fell into a trap and rotted for the rest of her life. She thinks that she could make a mark in the corporate world by agreeing to take responsibility of a crime to save her husband and his family. *Corporate* can be considered to be a film on women's liberation, because it so was not. It was just a corporatized version of a *sati savitri* who would take any kind of risk in the world to save her husband and his honour because that's what an ideal wife is supposed to do. If an ambitious woman wouldn't jeopardize her whole life for the sake of family and honour but then she wouldn't be known as a good wife.

Corporate is based on the cola war that raged between two soft drink giants in the country around two years back. The plot revolves around the way in which both soft drink companies use NGOs, the media and politicians to their own advantage. There are many scenes which bear a striking resemblance to incidents that actually happened at that time. *Corporate* (2006) weakens an interesting premise based on gender and business. While *Nishigandha Dasgupta* (Bipasha Basu), is a successful corporate executive with the "Sehgal Group of Companies", she is also a dutiful lover to *Ritesh Sahani* (Kay Kay Menon). She wants her lover to look successful in front of everybody in the company. For this, she prepares a report which is presented by him and for which he receives the credit. This is in contrast to *Nishigandha's* spirited and ambitious attitude. She has climbed up the corporate ladder and her career means a lot to her. Still, she prioritizes her responsibilities towards her lover over her career. She is shown to be taking up unethical activities in business and these are justified as she does them for the sake of love. In the end, she willingly takes up the blame for a fiasco that the company is involved in. She ends up being the sole accused sent to jail. Her rationality is secondary to her love whereby she is ready to be accused of a crime she hasn't committed. The portrayal of *Nishigandha's* decisions during the crisis period reinforces that women are not capable to think rationally and they will readily sacrifice not only their lives but also their reputation for the person they love. Though, she is a successful and intelligent business-woman, she falls prey to the corporate tussle and covert business tactics where all characters

other than her are absolved of morality. In the battle for supremacy in the corporate world, *Nishi* is a loser.

Fashion talks about an aspiring model Meghna Mathur (Priyanka Chopra) who wants to go to Mumbai and become a supermodel. She leaves her home to find success in the modeling world against her father's wishes. Meghna meets an old acquaintance, Rohit (Ashwin Mushran)—a gay, aspiring designer who assists Vinay Khosla (Harsh Chhaya). Meghna experiences difficulties during her early days; she auditions several times and is rejected. Meghna meets and befriends another struggling model, Maanav (Arjan Bajwa).

At Rahul Arora's (Samir Soni) fashion show, Meghna meets supermodel Shonali Gujral (Kangna Ranaut) and is ridiculed by the show's choreographer, Christine, and told to have her portfolio photographed by Kartik (Rohit Roy). To afford Kartik's fees, Meghna shoots a lingerie advertisement; she is mentored by another aspiring model, Janet (Mugdha Godse). Meghna's lingerie photos appear on the cover of a magazine; her relatives in Mumbai see the cover and ask her to leave the house. She shares an apartment with Manav. Meghna is noticed by Anisha Roy (Kitu Gidwani), an executive, of Panache, a major modeling agency. Anisha introduces her to her superior, Abhijit Sarin (Arbaaz Khan), who is impressed by Meghna's ambition and confidence. Panache's model is Shonali, but her drug abuse becomes problematic. Abhijit includes Meghna in a fashion show organised by Vinay Khosla, but is replaced after a misunderstanding. Abhijit consoles her, and decides to replace Shonali with Meghna as Panache's new model.

Meghna becomes an overnight success, ends her relationship with Maanav and begins an affair with Abhijit. Meanwhile, Janet goes to work for designer Rahul Arora. Rahul's mother becomes increasingly concerned about his sexual orientation; he asks Janet to marry him. Shonali's drug abuse worsens and she attends a rehabilitation clinic. Meghna pays the price of her increasing fame by losing her close friends due to her changed attitude towards them. She becomes pregnant with Abhijit's child, and reluctantly has an abortion due to conditions in her contract. After realizing that she was deceived in her relationship, Meghna tells Abhijit's wife about their relationship, and Abhijit ends Meghna's contract with Panache. Upset at the turn of events, Meghna descends into alcoholism; at a rave party she uses cocaine and unwittingly has a one-night stand. When sober, she feels guilty and returns to her parents in Chandigarh.

Broken and depressed, Meghna lives in Chandigarh for over a year. Her father encourages her to return to Mumbai; Meghna rekindles her friendship with Janet and models for Rohit's show, where she freezes on the ramp after seeing the lights and cameras. She visits Maanav (now an established model) to apologize and learns that he is engaged. Shonali appears on television as a mentally ill, homeless alcoholic; Meghna takes her in and tries to rehabilitate her. Meghna accepts an offer from Rahul to model, but a day before the show Shonali vanishes. Just before Meghna walks the ramp, she receives a call from the police telling her that Shonali is dead from a drug overdose. Meghna freezes; overcoming her grief, she walks the ramp, reviving her career and restoring her self-confidence. Meghna gives up drinking and smoking, and as the film closes she walks the ramp in Paris.

Comparison between the characters of the two movies:

Fashion revolves around the character of Meghna with the glamorous fashion world as the theme while *Corporate* talked about the characters existing in business world.

Bipasha Basu plays Nishigandha Dasgupta, a very ambitious and spirited woman whose career is the be-all and end-all for her. Nishigandha climbs up the corporate ladder fast, thanks to her unflinching determination to succeed and right guidance from her mentor. But nothing prepares her for what she will find at the top of the corporate ladder.

These are common scenes in "Corporate", which has glamorous Bipasha Basu playing an intelligent but manipulative business executive. She is ready to do anything to succeed, but ends up paying a heavy price for it.

Performance-wise Bipasha has come a long way - she has done a fabulous job as an ambitious woman. The kind of shrewdness in a woman that she essays has never been seen before in India films. "Corporate" will surely take her to greater heights and help her get rid of the "glamour girl" tag

Meghna's is a story of a good girl in a bad fashion world. A small town girl enters the world of glitz and glamour with dreams to fulfill. She defies her parents to pursue her ambitions. As expected, middle-class parents don't want their daughter to become a model. They want her to conform to societal norms. Meghna defies. She is shown to be a hard working professional who is determined to make it big. But she needs a man for it. Abhijit Sarin played by Arbaaz Khan makes her a show-stopper as well as the mother of his child. A relationship which could have been shown as purely professional becomes a personal and emotional one as Sarin uses Meghna. But she is also using him for her success, a point which the film never raises. In a scene from the film, when she becomes pregnant, Meghna tells Sarin that she wants to keep the child. This is a sudden invocation of Meghna's womanly side. All this while, she has been a career-oriented ambitious woman and this sudden motherly instinct comes as a surprise. On her failure, Meghna fails to maintain composure and ends up doing all the morally degraded things that are common in the fashion world (drunken driving, having sex with a stranger). She is portrayed more as a victim than a person who has struggled to carve her own destiny. The portrayal of the other two female models in the film also suggests signs of victimhood (Mugdha Godse's marriage of convenience to a gay designer and Kangana Ranaut's subjugation in front of her boyfriend). In the end when Meghna successfully returns to the fashion world, it seems more of a moral vindication than an assertion of her grit. While Bhandarkar's films are an appreciative attempt to bring to us, strong female characters, he still chooses to let them be in the larger societal frame-work. His characters though give a shot at defiance; they are not made to move out of the restricted sphere of action.

Conclusion:

It is because of the influence of movies that today India has one of the top notch businesspersons, entrepreneurs, managers who are women. Gender biases are being done

away with in most corporates; following the historic Vishakha Judgment today most respectable firms have a 'prevention of sexual harassment' cell in place. Today we have a Chanda Kocchar of ICICI Bank who came at No.37 in list of world's most powerful businesswomen, we have Naina Lal Kidwai who has been listed among the World's Top 50 Corporate Women from 2000 to 2003 by Fortune Magazine, we have Latika Thukral, CitiBank's business head, we have Sulajja Firodia Motwani, Joint Managing Director of Kinetic Engineering Ltd. We have ICICI bank which built its business by hiring smart women managers and creating a female-friendly environment. The list is endless. Indian women have come so far and they still have a long way to go.

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