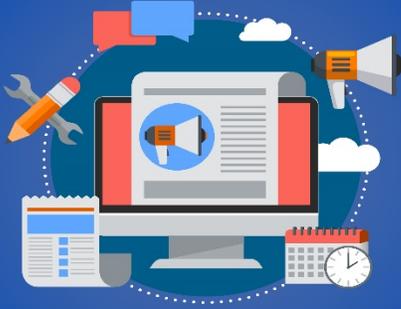


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## **Madhur Bhandakar's Women Centric Films: Through a Male Gaze**

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### **Abstract:**

In women-centric cinema, women basically stand against the injustice. From the thematic point of view, the movies focus on representation of women-centred issues. To cross the marginalised boundary and to create a space, a room of one's self, is the prime motive of such women-centric movies by encouraging social change in the treatment of women in Indian society. With regard to the male directors, a calculative step is taken in such movies by presenting an act of gaining sympathy for the female protagonists from the audiences, especially the male group as dominating the audience class. Hence, our point is here to show such designed portrayal of women conditions in Madhur Bhandarkar movies in which women towards the end of the movies are targeted as objects of sympathy despite their independent attitudes and efforts.

**Keywords: Women-centric, Male Director, Space, Audience.**

### **Introduction**

The Indian cinema is the world's largest producer of feature films, producing about 800 to 1000 films annually, double the numbers that Hollywood works on. "Bollywood", has a major share in Indian cinema industry, focuses on Hindi-language films, with its headquarters in Bombay; now Mumbai. But the fact is that India is a patriarchal society where even after more than seventy years of independence, the rules of Manu are considered as the authority. Though our constitution claims the equality of men and women, in reality it is felt to be a dream for Indian women in the contemporary period. Every Indian woman realises the gap between the words and actions more or less in her practical life. "India is a

male dominated society where women have been considered inferior to men in practical life. “ (Gupta 2003) “Although women have been given a higher position than men in the ancient Indian scriptures, in reality the case is just the opposite.” (Altekar 1955) “Even today women are prohibited from participating in many domestic as well as external matters especially which require decision making. They are under the influence of their parents before marriage and their husbands after marriage.” (Chakrapani and Kumar {ed.} 1994) “Sons are preferred over daughters in most parts of the country. This leads to preferential treatment of boys in families right from their birth.” (Agnihotri 1996) “The unequal treatment of women is reflected in the media in general and in the Indian Cinema in particular.” (Bollywood Cash 2003) “The Indian film industry is a male-dominated industry.” (Ganti 2004) “Women who pursue a career within the industry are mostly either actresses or playback singers. This trend has undergone a little change in recent years, where women have emerged as choreographers, costume designers, editors and screenwriters, but the number is much less when compared to their male counterparts. Very few women are lyricists or composers. While a handful of them venture into film direction, they have not achieved the commercial success like their male counterparts (p.94) So, in an industry that has a very sparse number of women behind the cameras, it can be assumed that the portrayal of women onscreen by male directors and other male professionals will have gender biases and constraints and this may not always convey women's world views, perceptions and subjective realities.” (Nandakumar 2011) “The roles played by the women onscreen are mostly the male director's notion of what roles women ought to be playing. This notion is based on the director's beliefs, attitudes and values, combined with the director's perception of the viewers' demand.” (Nandakumar 2011)

It is natural to say that Indian film industry is male dominated and women have their fix roles to play taking into consideration of expectation of the the male audience. In their study of Indian movies, Gokulsing & Dissnaye's (2004) found that women were given two major kinds of roles in commercial films, that of the mother (whose attributes are matched to that of the supreme form of feminine energy, the Goddess) and the wife based on the mythological character of Sita (epitomizes extreme devotion to the husband). In fact there are very few female directors or technicians as compared to males in Indian film industry. But the point is that female directors have been portraying their actresses as more aggressive individuals. The women directors try to give a very real description of social oppression. This description onscreen causes a vicarious feeling amongst the women in the audience, as they can identify the injustice in their lives with the character onscreen. The women directors have

used the sentimental aspect much less than their male counterparts. Further they try to address through their movies that women are very brave, and they could do anything without drawing sympathy from the audience and the society as a whole. Movies like *Chingari*, *Fire*, *Water* and *Daman* made by female directors could be the best instances to justify the points. For example, in *Chingari*, the female protagonist kills the head priest not because he had sexually abused her for years but because he had killed her fiancé. Similarly, in *Fire*, the central characters are shown to get involved in a homosexual relationship by choice, and in the end they decide to leave their home and live with each other. In contrast, the male directors, though they claim to make women centric movies highlighting the women issues and causes and thus sympathetic towards the women class in general, but inherently, it appears to be nothing but ironical, exaggerating the women state as feeble and helpless. Movies made and directed by male group are going to be other platforms where women ceaseless struggle to get a space and identity are under questions, no point of full stop.

Madhur Bhandarkar is one such male director of women-centric movies whose films are inspired by the real life issues and situations. His movies are made on women's lives, their problems, struggles and their responses and reactions to the critical situations but through a male perspective.

As for the personal details are concerned, Madhur Bhandarkar was born on 26<sup>th</sup> August in the year 1968. Professionally, he is an Indian film director, script writer, and producer. He debuted with the movie *Trishakti* a few years ago. and went on to direct several critically and commercially films. The drama film *Chandini Bar* (2001), won him the National Film Award for best Film on social issues. Bhandarkar received the National Film Awards for the best feature film and best director for *Page 3* (2005) and *Traffic Signal* (2007) respectively. The drama film *Fashion* (2008) won him several honours including Filmfare Awards nominations for best director and best screenplay. In 2016, Bhandarkar was honoured with the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian honour by the Government of India. He also got the best director award for Indu Sarkar at Bollywood Festival Norway.

Our point is that his films no doubt picture on women, the camera predominantly is on the heroine's face, revealing her body gestures, psychological thought process before the audiences, hypnotising them by controlling the actions as the main protagonist, interacting and communicating with the audiences and fixes their eyes on her in the spell of make-believe world. But at the point of climax , the heroines, who were independent, bold, self-

determinate, appear to be failures in their fighting, submissive and accepting the stereotyped systems meant for them for generations. To illustrate our points and arguments, I analyse the story lines of some of Madhur Bhandarkar movies i.e., *Chandini Bar*, *Corporate*, *Page 3* and *Fashion*. Madhur Bhandarkar movies stand in the line of the realistic cinema as they deal with various serious and complex situations encountered by women in their day to day life in general and Madhur Bhandarkar's heroines in particular. Hence in this context, such movies differ from the popular cinema, especially meant for entertainment and pleasure.

### ***Chandini Bar(2001):***

*Chandini Bar* is the first women centric movie of Madhur Bhandarkar. The movie highlights the issue of prostitution, a bitter and harsh reality in a woman's life. Here Tabu acts the role of Mumtaz, a village girl displaced off her hometown after a communal riot taking the life of her parents and she is eventually forced to go to Mumbai with her only relative left, her uncle to become a beer-bar dancer. Upholding the responsibility of earning the bread and butter for her drunkard uncle, she miserably gets raped by her uncle. Drooped in such trauma and uncomfortable situation, she meets the gangster called Potiya Sawant in the beer-bar, who in order to defend her honour kills Mumtaz's uncle and marries her giving the license of male protector. Mumtaz decides to leave her past profession and concentrates wholly on her family life with her two children and her husband. In her new setting, she stays home to raise her two children and commits to protect them from the world of prostitution and gangs. But her protective world again is disturbed and disturbed with the murder of her husband Potiya in a police encounter. She has to return to her bar profession to support her children. In the end, she cannot protect her children despite her attempts. Her son becomes a killer, her daughter becomes a bar dancer in her turn, and Mumtaz turns to prostitution in a tragic attempt to save her son.

### ***Page3 (2005):***

*Page3* movie released in 2005, is about false and pretentive double standard Mumbai celebrity life styles through the eyes of a female entertainment journalist Madhavi Sharma. It explores the power-play between the rich and famous and the media. Madhavi is a newspaper journalist whose task is to fill the page of Page 3 column. Her job is to attend celebrity parties, collect information like their dressing styles, their make ups and what they eat in the parties and to report these trivial matters in Page 3 column. She is accompanied by two

roommates named Pearl, an air-hostess who want to marry a rich man and settle down to a life of comfort and Gayatri, a struggling actress. As the story moves on, Gayatri is found to be seduced by a leading married actor Rohit Kumar. When she knows that she is pregnant, he advises her to abort the baby. Frustrated, she tries for a suicidal attempt but is saved by Madhavi and Pearl. In this process, she loses her child and leaves Mumbai. Further, her friend Pearl finds a rich old businessman and gets married to him and leaves India. In the meantime, Madhavi becomes alone and finds depressing and meaningless in her job of interacting shallow and pretentive high society people. She chooses to do something that carries meanings and truths and accompanies veteran reporter Vinayak Mane in the crime-beat. Vinayak goes to another news story in Nashik and Madhavi is asked to take charge of crime news. She learns of the child molestation scandal committed by Romesh Thapar and on the basis of her investigation the police conducts a raid and arrests Romesh Thapar. Madhavi manages to capture the whole event on camera, and develops a breaking expose story. She asks Deepak to run the story as the headline article for the next day's news edition and is promised for that. But Agrawal, the owner of the newspaper, declines to publish the story fearing of the major loss of his business as the newspaper receives major advertisement revenue and other sponsorship from Ramesh and fires Madhavi from her job. But eventually, she gets job as a Page 3 writer in another newspaper again returning to her shallow task.

### ***Corporate (2006):***

*Corporate* released in July 2006 centers around the story of corporate lady Nishigandha Dashgupta 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 power live-in boyfriend and his family. In fact, the movie *Corporate* 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 is what generally 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. As the story begins, Bipasha Basu or Nishi plays a key role in one of the rival FMCG corporations, is portrayed as a smart and talented executive with a dynamic persona. But as the story progresses, this self- confident business woman ends up her life being feeble, vulnerable and gullible in order to save her live-in spouse's family.

Corporate has two main players: the Sehgal Company headed by Vinay Sehgal (Rajat Kapoor) and the Marwah Company headed by Dharmesh Marwah (Raj Babbar). Both companies have their key players and Nishigandha (Bipasha Basu) plays a major role in the Sehgal Industry. Each industry tries to gain an upper hand over the other be it in acquiring projects or tearing down the image of the other. The Marwah group gets an esteemed and much coveted project which pushes the Sehgal group to come up with a lucrative project but at the expense of their competitors. Nishi steals an idea from her competitors and uses it as leverage for her own company. With her smartness, Nishi steals the idea of a cola lunch from their competitors. The cola is launched but the drink is somehow contaminated and this is when the Marwahs decide to get back at the Sehgals for stealing their idea. The Marwahs decide to expose the Sehgals and their contaminated soft drinks. Now it is a business war and each side goes to any length to win the battle and tarnish the image of the other. Moral codes are broken, jealousy, power and greed emerge in the forefront and Nishi realizes that she is nothing more than a mere pawn in this murky game. Meanwhile Nishi's relationship with her live in boyfriend Ritesh Sahani (Kay Kay Menon) too is going through turmoil. Politicians and other power hungry people all become a part of this war and join sides. At length, Nishi becomes a loser.

***Fashion (2008):***

Set against the backdrop of glamorous fashion industry, the movie *Fashion* is about the story of a small-town girl Meghna Mathur (Priyanka Chopra) with big dreams. She always thinks that her life is meant to be famous like being a supermodel in the fashion industry. But after taking her steps into the fashion industry, she realises that she has to pay a heavy price to become successful. Living a middle-class lifestyle in Chandigarh's Sector 17, Meghna Mathur wins a beauty contest and decides to become a supermodel despite the protest of her father, who wants her to be a Chartered Accountant. Fixed in her decision, she lands to Mumbai and stays with her maternal uncle, Kuldip and his wife, Santosh. When they find out that she has been appearing scantily clad in megazines, they ask her to leave. She moves in with fellow model, Manav Bhasin (Arjan Bajwa), and soon finds herself as the lead model of 'Panache', replacing Shonali Gujral (Kangana Ranaut). Her decline from fame and fortune begins when she has an affair with her boss, Abhijit Sarin (Arbaaz Khan), becomes pregnant and gets fired for attempting to break-up the Sarin family. Disgraced and publicly humiliated, Meghna feels guilty and returns to her parents in Chandigarh. Broken and

depressed, she lives with her parents for over a year. Her father encourages her to return to Mumbai. Meghna rebuilds her friendship with Janet and models for Rohit's show, where she freezes on the ramp after seeing the lights and cameras. She accepts an offer from Rahul to model, but a day before the show Sonali already appeared to be mentally ill and homeless alcoholic, 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. She gives up drinking and smoking and as the film closes, she walks the ramp in Paris.

### Conclusion

Whether we cite the story of Mumtaz in *Chandini Bar*, Madhavi Sharma in *Page 3*, Nishigandha Dasgupta in *Corporate*, or Meghna Mathur in *Fashion*, all heroines are victims of moral vindication than assertions of their individual grits. 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. His female protagonists though initially bold, dynamic and challenging, get slowly declined as puppets through the progress of the film in the mid-way and become invisible in the established patriarchal male-dominated society.

Besides Madhur Bhandarkar movies, we can see the changing faces of characterization of women in other Bollywood films. There are other films or we can say instances where women have broken the barriers of their stereotype roles of mother, wife or beloved and found themselves fit in different dynamic roles that won them clappings and fame from the audience as well as critics. Such roles by women may be Preity Zinta as Preet Oberoi in *Sangharsh*, Karisma Kapoor as Nandini in *Shakti: The Power*, Shilpa Shetty's role as Shikha in *Life in a....Metro*, Vidya Balan as Silk Smitha in *The Dirty Picture*, Seema Biswas as Phoolan Devi in *The Bandit Queen*, Shabana Azmi as Pooja in *Arth*, Raveena Tandon as Durga in *Daman* and many more etc.

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