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## **‘Her’ Cultural Capital: A Portrayal of the Role of Woman in Hindi Cinema (*Devdas* and *Purab aur Paschim*)**

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Bollywood is a silver screen where a plethora of stories are told to masses. These stories unravel various kinds of characters and societies. Since the production of movies like *Mother India*, Hindi cinema has largely been patriarchal. Female hero oriented movies are very few. Amongst these few movies, most of them although showcase female strength but they still manage to remain within the patriarchal limits. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse a misogynistic portrayal of women in Hindi cinema, with special emphasis on the films *Devdas* and *Purab aur Paschim*. This analysis would be looked through the framework of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s idea on ‘Forms of Capital’.

In his article ‘Forms of Capital’, Bourdieu talks about the different forms of capital prevailing in his contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> century French society, the reproduction of these forms in the society and the ways through which the dominant classes maintain their social positions. While discussing about the three forms of capital, namely economic capital, cultural capital and social capital, he basically concretizes his arguments to the idea that capital is the basis of all forms of transactions. In this paper we will be focusing on Bourdieu’s idea about cultural capital, which he further classifies into three forms, namely cultural capital in its embodied state, cultural capital in its objectified state and cultural capital in its institutionalised state. Cultural capital in its embodied state is either biologically acquired or acquired over a period of time. This biologically or ideologically inherited form of cultural capital is indoctrinated into the individual’s “habitus”. This form of cultural capital is intangible. It cannot be transmitted instantaneously and it dies with the death of the individual. We may note that the kind of the embodied cultural capital inherited by the individual would depend on the parents, the historical location and society of the individual. In the analysis of the films in this paper, while primarily dealing with the role of women, specific light has been thrown on the various forms of cultural capital that different sections of the society portrayed in the film, possess and the way power structure of the then society affects the concept of “cultural capital”.<sup>1</sup>

*Purab aur Paschim* (East and West), is a 1970 Hindi feature film directed by Manoj Kumar. The first phase of the movie is located in Allahabad during the peak of the turbulent times of the struggle for Indian Independence against the British Government, the second phase largely in London and the third and the final phase culminates once again in post independent Allahabad. As the name suggests, the movie showcases a dichotomy of the east and the west, further valorising the east, especially India and vilifying the west, especially London, in the process. *Purab aur Paschim* paints a concept of the nation as a mother. Before the second phase of the movie starts in London, Manoj Kumar’s film shows a republic day celebration where a dance performance depicts “mother nation” as a bride wearing tricoloured clothes. According to film critic Jyotika Viridi, ‘by the end of the nineteenth century, in the early phase of nationalism, popular literature, song, drama, and painting-in

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, ‘Forms of Capital’, Trans. J. Richardson, New York: Greenwood, 241-258

fact the entire gamut of art and culture-was concerned with the problem of expressing “national identity,” and used the mother icon to personify the nation.’<sup>2</sup>

The movie, while drawing out the comparison between the east and the west, also moulds the female protagonist, Preeti in the character frame of the Other woman (here depiction of the west) and the Indian state as the “mother”, thus placing both stereotypical roles of women against each other, fighting for the survival of the self. In her introduction in the movie, Preeti is shown to be clad in a miniskirt, her face revealing itself gradually from the clouds of smoke from her cigarette, when the word “Paschim” (west) flashes on the screen. Serving the motive of the movie, the Other woman loses her original identity and drowns in the image of the mother woman (nation). Only then could she get the hero’s “undiluted” love and get married to him. In one point in time in the movie, Preeti’s father comments, “*Raaste mein behata hua pani agar Ganga mein ja mile toh Gangajal ban jata hain*”,<sup>3</sup> wherein he compares the woman to water flowing through the streets as opposed to the male hero who he considers to be Ganga, conventionally known as the “pristine river” and says that waters flowing through the streets when fall into Ganga, is cleansed of all its dirt. The closure of the movie also symbolically portrays Preeti, initially a girl wearing short dresses and miniskirts, smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol, changed into a girl decked up as an Indian bride, quitting her drinking and smoking habits and instead praying in the temple. It is then that she declares that she wouldn’t go back to the west, i.e., London and live her life in the east, i.e., India.

If observed through Bourdieu’s concept of the nexus between “high culture” and “low culture”, the movie being directed by an Indian film maker depicts Indian culture as “high culture” and the western culture as “low culture”. The power structure at any point in time in history would define “high’ and “low” cultures according to its own conveniences. Any kind of culture that might be trying to pose a challenge to its authority would be repressed and termed as “low culture.” In one instance in the film, western tradition is directly referred to as ‘*kalank*’ (blemish)<sup>4</sup> that even the “pristine river” ‘*Ganga Maiyaa*’<sup>5</sup> would not be able to cleanse off. India, in the film, is primarily depicted as a land where one is spiritually awakened. One particular scene in the film shows a group of non Indian people in London, sauntering on the London streets singing ‘*Hare rama, hare krishna*’.<sup>6</sup> In the movie it is then mentioned that Indian traditions and culture are “so great” that even foreigners turn towards it to seek solitude and peace. The same religious song also plays in the background when Mohan acknowledges his wife and son as his own. Here we may note two important aspects.

Mohan seeing his wife and his son, strikes them towards the ground. His English lover woman gets infuriated and asks his wife to retaliate but Mohan’s father-in-law tells the English woman that in India husbands are placed on a pedestal same as God’s, wives worship them, they do not disobey or hit their husbands. The wife anyway is not given any voice or agency. It is the son or in other words the heir to his blood that changes Mohan’s heart and not the wife’s sorrowful state that makes him accept them once again. We may also observe that the English lover woman whom Mohan leaves in order to be with his Indian wife and son, is a small but similar story of the discarding of the west to receive the east in the film. The Other woman always has to disappear and that’s what the English woman does by

<sup>2</sup> Viridi, Jyotika, ‘The Idealized Woman’, *The Cinematic ImagiNation*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 66

<sup>3</sup> *Purab aur Paschim*. Dir. Manoj Kumar. India, 1970

<sup>4</sup> *Purab aur Paschim*. Dir. Manoj Kumar. India, 1970

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

running away into oblivion while the same ‘*Hare rama...*’<sup>7</sup> song reverberates in the background. The transformation in Preeti’s personality also very significantly exhibits that cultural capital an Indian woman possesses is “high culture”.

Based on Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel, Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s directed film *Devdas* (2002) portrays a tragic triangular love story between Devdas, Parvati and Chandramukhi. The plot is set in pre independent Bengal. This film also contains shades of patriarchy and misogyny. Parvati, popularly known as Paro, who is Devdas’ childhood friend and sweetheart, stays back in Bengal whereas Devdas, by the virtue of being a man and a zamindar’s son, receives his knowledge of institutional law from London. One of the most significant aspects of the film is the difference created between the “high culture” of the upper caste Bengalis and the “low culture” of the lower caste Bengalis of the then society portrayed in the film. Parvati’s father, although being a zamindar himself, marries a dancer woman. Sumitra, Paro’s mother had been a dancer of the Jatra parties (a form of dance and theatre from Bengal) before her marriage, which Devdas’ father condescendingly comments to be “embarrassing”. If looked through the lens of the concept propagated by Bourdieu on embodied cultural capital, we may state that in the film the embodied cultural capital of a woman belonging to a dance troupe is considered to be inferior by the higher class and higher caste people. However, a similar difference between “high culture” and “low culture” can also be seen in the portrayal of the scenes considering Chandramukhi, the “*tawaiif*” (courtesan) and the “elite” people in the film, which in Chandramukhi’s case consists of all the conventional Bengali people irrespective of their caste or class.

Paro, for instance, herself was rejected for marriage with Devdas by his family based on the fact that her mother had been a “*nautanki wala*”.<sup>8</sup> Instead of being empathetic and understanding towards Chandramukhi, Paro also holds a similar disdainful notion towards the “*tawaiif*”. Paro, on her visit to Chandramukhi, comments “*Tawaiifo ki takdeer mein shohar nahi hote...*”<sup>9</sup> (There are no husbands in the luck of a courtesan)<sup>10</sup>. However, later, Paro does take a stand for Chandramukhi in front of her husband’s family. She visits Chandramukhi in her “*kotha*” and invites her to a Durga puja to the “*haveli*” (home) of Paro’s in laws. Ironically, the Durga Puja, as mentioned in the film, is not complete without the soil from the courtyard of a courtesan’s “*kotha*”! Chandramukhi keeps her word and visits the “*haveli*”. However, Paro provides a false identity of Chandramukhi to her in laws, fearing the reactions of the then society. Towards the end of a dance sequence, Chandramukhi’s true identity is revealed. Paro receives furious reactions from her in laws. She does try to take a stand for Chandramukhi in front of her family but in the end Paro’s voice is not heard. Chandramukhi has to leave the “*haveli*” in tears. Paro is punished and ordered to stay indoors forever, for the fear that stepping outside the patriarchal boundaries would free Paro from the patriarchal shackles bound to her and allow her to pose a challenge to the power structure just like Chandramukhi.

Chandramukhi, the “*tawaiif*”, performs in front of her male audience, showcasing her talent of music and dance. However her knowledge about these art forms are considered to be “low culture” and looked down upon by the “elite” men and women. The courtesan in comparison to the woman of the “*haveli*” is largely portrayed as a bold woman. In her “*kotha*” (brothel), she is shown to have authority over her customers. In the film, one of her customers, Kalibabu, behaves inappropriately with her. Chandramukhi orders him to leave

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *Devdas*. Dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali. India, 2002

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> My translation.

her “kotha” at once which Kalibabu also obeys without any further word. Gregory D. Booth in one of his articles states the meaning of the Urdu word “*tawaif*” (courtesan) as a ‘performing artist’. He says, ‘cinematic tawaifs are female characters that often (and despite their situations) appear to possess more independence and often assertiveness (in cinematic terms) than most normal female roles.’ Booth illustrates his arguments with an example from a Hindi feature film, *Amiri Garibi* (Richness Poorness)<sup>11</sup>, stating that Sona, the “tawaif” in the film replies with disdain to the villains in the movie who come to her “kotha” and forces her to perform for them, ‘No one gives me orders in my house, behave properly or get out.’<sup>12</sup>

Booth draws a comparison between the woman of the house, which he says to be conventionally termed as “*devi*” and the “*tawaif*”. He mentions that the little amount of agency that the “*devi*” has is within the boundaries set by the patriarchal power structure of the then society. One particular detail he states is about the suffixes associated to the names of the women of the house and the courtesans. The woman of the house is referred to as ‘*devi*’ literally meaning goddess—or a variety of terms used for female relatives, such as *bahen* [sister], *bhabi* [brother’s wife], *chachi* [auntie], etc., depending on age, social status, relationship, and so on. Respectable Indian women were thus exempted from the male sexualised gaze by being associated with either divinity or with one’s own family.’ On the other hand, a courtesan is referred to as ‘*jan* or *bai* attached to their names, as markers of professional tawaif status.’<sup>13</sup> So, a courtesan can be basically considered to be a professional, working woman. In the film, *Devdas* (2002), the “tawaif” once mentions to Devdas that she has so much wealth that she treads on it. Thus, the inferior status given to her by a structure governed by patriarchal power, who obviously considers her to be a challenge to their rule, is self explanatory.

However at various other instances in the film, it is also shown that the courtesan considers herself to be the Other woman in Devdas’ life, she considers herself to be his “*kadmo ka dhool*”<sup>14</sup> (dirt under Devdas’ feet)<sup>15</sup> as compared to Paro, whom she thinks to be his life’s flower. We may note that through the Foucauldian framework of the nexus between power and knowledge, Chandramukhi can be considered to be a capillary of power who ideologically indoctrinates the power hierarchy of the then society portrayed in the film.

The film portrays that the “tawaif” does not, rather cannot get the hero’s love by virtue of being the Other woman. Her love for Devdas remains unrequited throughout. Devdas comments at one time, ‘*Tum aurat ho. Pehchano apne aapko. Aurat maa hoti hain, behen hoti hain, patni hoti hain, dost hoti hain aur jab woh kuch nahi hoti, tawaif hoti hain.*’ (You are a woman. Recognise yourself. ‘A woman is a mother, a sister, a wife or a friend: and when she is nothing she is a tawaif.’<sup>16</sup>) When he is heartbroken, he seeks temporary respite in Chandramukhi’s kotha but never accepts her as his lover. As already discussed, the film showcases Chandramukhi’s character as a capillary of power, in this case too, she also blames her “fate” of not being loved, to her profession because of which she leaves her art forms behind, wishing this would bring her close to Devdas. When this too fails to grant her wish, she accepts herself to be a servant to him and takes care of him when he is gravely ill.

<sup>11</sup> My translation.

<sup>12</sup> D. Booth, Gregory, ‘Making a Woman from a Tawaif: Courtesans as Heroes in Hindi Cinema’, New Zealand: New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies, 2007, 8

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>14</sup> *Devdas*. Dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali. India, 2002

<sup>15</sup> My translation.

<sup>16</sup> D. Booth, Gregory, ‘Making a Woman from a Tawaif: Courtesans in Hindi Cinema’, New Zealand: New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies, 2007, 4.

Devdas, in the end, however, dies on Parvati's doorsteps and not in Chandramukhi's arms. Thus, the courtesan is not at all given the space of being loved.

The two films discussed above engage in symbolic contest between the conventional woman standing inside the patriarchal threshold and the Other woman, standing beyond it. Both the societies in which the plots of the films are set either entirely wanes the image of the Other woman or suppresses her. Bharat will only marry that Preeti who has discarded her embodied western cultural capital (*Purab aur Paschim*). Devdas will only love and die for Parvati whom he considers to be his "possession"; not for Chandramukhi, who has embodied cultural capital of a courtesan and whom he cannot "possess" (*Devdas*).

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