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Discovering Self-Identity: A Study of the Films *English-Vinglish* and *Queen*

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Abstract:

The present paper deals with the changing role of women in Indian cinema particularly Hindi cinema. The Hindi cinema is largely male dominated but from time to time some film makers have made women centric films and raised issues concerning women. The Hindi cinema often portrays the stereotypical images of women and especially before the 1990s the characters of women even if bold were drawn within the confines of patriarchal structures of society. But after the advent of globalization, some film makers with greater freedom of expression have shown women breaking the gender stereotypes and deals with serious issues for the emancipation of women. In the selected films for my paper, the female characters who lives under the patriarchy are shown discovering their self identity.

Keywords: identity, patriarchy, stereotypes, globalization, emancipation

Cinema has become an object of academic interest especially with the introduction of Cultural Studies into literature departments in India in particular and South Asia in general where maximum number of films are produced. India is the world's largest producer of films annually and here cinema is regarded as the most popular form of entertainment for both elite and non-elite classes. As a part of popular culture cinema has established its root in Indian society and has a great impact in the shaping of the socio-cultural norms of society.

The journey of Indian Cinema which began in 1913 with the release of the first Indian film *Raja Harishchandra* completed its 100 successful years in 2013 and the journey is still going on and it will continue till man desires for entertainment. The main purpose of cinema is entertainment and it has been successful in its purpose. However, along with entertainment some films have been instrumental in creating social awareness by presenting the problems persisting in society. In this way, cinema has also shown its strength and potential as an effective medium for change in the society.

Hindi cinema is a major representative of Indian cinema though a number of films continue to be made in other languages like Tamil, Telgu, Malyalam and Bangla. Hindi

cinema has largely represented a male dominated society but from time to time it has produced some significant women oriented movies and has raised issues concerning women. The condition of women in India was supposed to improve after Independence of India in 1947, but even after independence and the enactment of fundamental rights by the government in 1950, women were still subject to violence, discrimination, exploitation, inequality by the society. The condition of women began to be reflected in Hindi films like *Bandani*, *Sujata*, *Seema*, *Mother India*, *Dahej*, *Sahab Biwi aur Gulam*, and *Kanyadaan* etc. The issues of female education, dowry, child marriage, widow remarriage, gender discrimination were explored in these movies.

Most of the movies before 1990s portrayed stereotypical image of women. Women who were virtuous, who loved and cared their family and made sacrifices for the happiness of their family. Such women were also portrayed as suppressing their desires and following patriarchal values and traditions. Even the movie which talked about women's emancipation were very much within the confines of the patriarchal structures of the society. But with the advent of globalization in 1990s, when the Indian government adopted the policy of liberalization, privatization and globalization and opened its economy to that of the other nations, things began to change. Not only was there the inflow of capital from foreign nations but foreign culture, ideas etc. also began to filter into the society that made huge impact on popular culture especially Hindi cinema.

The impact of globalization could be markedly seen in the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema after 1990. Hindi cinema which rarely dared to portray taboo subjects like women's sexuality, extramarital affairs, single motherhood, marital rape and homosexuality began to portray women's issues with greater openness and powerfully alongside the conventional stereotypes. Now in the films women are shown as creating their own identities outside the domestic space, expressing their sexuality and desires, demanding equal rights as given to men and breaking the conventional notions and images which was generally portrayed in Hindi cinema. Films like *Damini*, *Fire*, *Kya Kehna*, *Jism*, *Dor*, *Fashion*, *The Dirty Picture*, *English Vinglish*, *Mardani*, *Queen*, *Dear Zindagi* etc are women centric films and explores deeply the lives of women.

The two films which I have chosen for my discussion are women oriented films. These two movies were liked by audiences and critics as well and were super hits. Both the films deals with women's identity in male dominated society and challenges the idea that a woman's identity is in relation with a man. Simon de Beauvoir in the introduction to her magnum opus work *The Second Sex* writes:

"Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as autonomous being...for him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her: She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject; he is absolute - she is the other."

The movie *English-Vinglish* is the story of a housewife Shashi (Sridevi), who is caring and dutiful towards her family. She also runs a small home-based business of selling laddoos. Although she is a good wife and a good mother and love her family a lot, she does not get the same love in return. The family members particularly her husband Satish (Adil Hussain) and daughter Sapna (Navika Kotia) mock at her as she lacks good communication skill in English. The colonial mindset that a man's superiority is judged by his proficiency in speaking English is carried by them and they always humiliate Shashi for her linguistic incompetency. Though humiliated all the time , she never complains and performs her role as a housewife passionately. Her daughter feels ashamed and embarrassed when she has to accompany her mother for PTA meeting and snubs her for speaking too much with the teacher in Hindi. Shashi has accepted this humiliation as a part of her life and to a certain extent ignores the behaviour of her family members.

Being a responsible woman, Shashi is invited to America by her sister to assist in the marriage of her daughter. Shashi goes to America all alone. Though the journey has its own challenges, Shashi feels happy and confident to be in America. Initially she faces little problems arising due to her lack of fluency in English but later on she manages things in her own peculiar way. She enrolls herself in an English speaking course which promises the candidate to be fluent in English in four weeks. Shashi pays the fees from the money she has saved for herself. She feels passionate about learning English. The atmosphere of the class is very friendly and Shashi soon befriends people of different ethnicities and nationalities attending the class. One of the Shashi's classmates, A French chef, Laurent (Mehdi Nebbou) likes her and feels attracted towards her and praises her beauty. Being a traditional Indian woman , Shashi marks a line between her and Laurent and makes him understand that she need respect not love. However She feels good when Laurent appreciates her beauty. When Shashi finds that she is moving away from her responsibilities she decides to leave the classes but she is helped by Laurent to learn English being at home.

The day of test coincides with the day of wedding ceremony, though she has planned to give the test, somehow she misses as she has to make laddoos again, in the art in which she is perfect. After the wedding ceremony, everyone gives their blessing to the newly married couple. Shashi, though her husband interrupts, communicates in English and blesses the new couple and tells them the importance of marriage and family and the love and care one needs from family members without being judgemental. Her husband and daughter feel ashamed of their rude behaviour towards her and feel sorry. Shashi passes the test as her English teacher listens her speech and give her the certificate which declares that she has passed the test with distinction. Shashi becomes a woman who is confident and liberated. She can take decisions of her own and has discovered her identity which she has lost in doing her familial duties. Shashi happily returns back to India with her family.

The character of Shashi is a combination of tradition and modernity. She feels

happy to live under the patriarchy until and unless her life is not suffocated. She performs all her duties properly. But when she finds that she is not respected by her family only because she has certain weaknesses and her identity is only limited to be a housewife, she thinks of exploring herself. The journey to America provides her the opportunity to explore herself as she has a lot of time for herself. She has a forward looking approach as she grabs the opportunity to learn English. She is not hesitant in making male friends but she know her limits. Laurent wants a romantic relationship with her but she denies as she is married and still believe in Indian values. When a classmates reveals that he is gay, Shashi expressions are very normal and she shows her modern outlook that every person is normal and have the right to be respected whether he is homosexual or heterosexual. Shashi wants to make her weakness as her strength and work hard for learning English and finally passes the test.

Shashi in the process of self discovery finds that it is not the language which is required to establish her identity but her inner strength that motivates her to be what she is. For her the process of learning becomes an interesting one and she becomes confident and smart. She gathers the strength to take her decisions. For instances, she takes decision solely to join the English speaking class, on the wedding day when the laddoos get spoil because of her son's mischief she decides to make laddoos again, the art in which she is perfect and misses the test, and finally when she has to bless the newly wed couple, her husband tries to stop her as he would be embarrassed of Shashi's lack of fluency in English but she delivers her speech in English and surprises everyone. The journey makes Shashi confident and bold and she discovers her self identity as being a woman who is worthy for love and respect.

The movie *Queen* is the story of Rani (Kangana Ranaut), a young and beautiful girl. In the beginning of the movie we find that she lives happily under the patriarchy. She feels excited to get marry and makes preparation for her wedding. It seems that marriage is the only dream she has to fulfil in her life. When her fiance Vijay (Raj Kummar Rao) calls off the wedding by saying that Rani is no more compatible to him as he has changed after his trip to foreign country. Though rejected and heartbroken, Rani tries to persuade Vijay to get marry but all her emotinal attempts fail. In her depressed state , she comes back home and lock herelf in the room. It seems that her life is only dependent on Vijay and marriage is only thing which makes life happy and beautiful. Being in trouble, Rani does not want to devastate her life and she decides to move on. She take a bold decision to go on the planned honeymoon to Paris and Amsterdam all alone and her family supports her.

In Paris Rani befriend Vijayalakshmi (Lisa Haydon). Vijayalakshmi is an independent woman working for herself and living her life on her own terms. Rani faces the troubles coming in her way but does not give up. She begins to enjoy her life with her new friend. She drinks, she dances, she does whatever she wants. Once, she mistakenly sends a picture of herself, wearing a revealing outfit to Vijay instead of Vijayalakshmi. This new and modern look of Rani surprises the male gaze of Vijay and

he begins to search for Rani.

Rani who is gathering experience through her journey sets off for Amsterdam. There she has to share a hostel room with three men. Initially she hesitates but the friendly nature of the men make her feel safe and she befriends them. She has a lot of fun and adventure with her new friends. Rani feels more confident when she accepts the cooking challenge and proves herself. She even kisses the Italian chef, Marcello (Marco Canadea), to prove that Indians are best at everything. When Vijay locates Rani and ask her forgiveness, Rani ignores Vijay and tells him to settle things on going back to India and that she wants to enjoy with her friends.

After returning back to India, she meets Vijay and hands back the engagement ring and ends her relationship with him. After her Journey she has become a confident woman, who has an identity of her own , and can take decision for her own.

The character of Rani develops throughout the film. In the beginning she is simple, shy and underconfident. She always accompany her younger brother with her. The fact is that she is moulded with in structures of patriarchy. But when her wedding is cancelled and the patriarchal values suffocates her, she rebels. She begins to take decisions for her and the first bold decision she takes is going to her honeymoon all alone. In foreign cities, she lives in the way she wants and even she does things which are prohibited by patriarchy. The change in her attitude could be seen when she feels comfortable in sharing a hostel room with three men. She finds a new way to look at her life while gathering experiences throughout her journey. Her traditional way of life has made Vijay to reject her but her journey makes her modern, though she has not forgotten the Indian values and the same man wants her back in life though at this time the woman rejects with a smile.

The portrayal of these woman characters reflects the changing role of Indian women in Hindi cinema . The recent trends shows that cinema is dealing with women's issues more seriously. The discovery of self identity by both Shashi and Rani make them feel empowered. The two emancipated women shows that a woman can take her own decisions and can live on her own terms. The powerful portrayal of the women characters in these two movie ensures that cinema can play a vital role in empowering women though its brilliant content.

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