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Locating Female Solidarity and Sisterhood in *Pagglait* (2021)

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Abstract:

Cinema reflects social phenomenon: its main values, beliefs and ideas, and thus it becomes a cultural product. The paper aims to trace the development of the portrayal of woman and female friendships in the Hindi movie *Pagglait* (2021). The paper will also shed light on the background forces of patriarchy, its control on the lives of women and prevalent notions about woman friendships. The paper will also study sociological themes such as social structure, patriarchy, subordination, hegemony, providing special impetus to woman's issues, their friendships and try to highlight the lesser talked about harmony and solidarity between women. The study intends to observe the concept of sisterhood as an endeavour of emancipation and empowerment of women. Other related critics and scholars are also considered for the discussion of the concept of Sisterhood. The scope of the paper is to clarify the liberal feminist notion of sisterhood in the selected movie taken up for analysis as a privilege to enhance women's growth and to strengthen the social bond to achieve women's liberation. The paper aims to emphasise on the power of collectiveness of mass struggle of women that leads to realisation of self and identity.

Keywords: Cinema, Culture, Values, Female Friendships, Solidarity, Feminism, Sisterhood, Patriarchy, Hegemony, Liberation, Self.

In sociological studies, cinema is medium that crucially represents a historic and social practice regarding gender approach. Thus, media becomes indispensable tool for the creation of ideologies and socialisation of gender. Dines and Humez in their book *Gender, Race And Class In The Media: A Critical Reader* (2003) assert that "products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our identities, our sense of selfhood, our construction of ethnicity, race and nationality, of sexuality and of 'us' and 'them'". Jain and Rai in their *Films and feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema* (2002) state that films mediate between dream and social realities, collective concerns and individual aims it assumes seminal dimension as a humanist discourse that can redirect cultural and material fabric of our lives every day.

The portrayal of women and the roles assigned to her is very much devoid of any seriousness and is dispensable. She is only there to serve the hero, help to bring in necessary developments to aid the hero's progress of character, and there is absolutely no mention of her otherwise. Butalia (1984) deems the commercial Indian cinema as the most powerful tool of communication in Indian society in her *Woman In Indian Cinema (1984)* with quite a number of directions who started addressing women's issues like marriage, rape, dowry, widowhood, women started getting more screen space. Fast forward to today in 2021, Indian cinema has tried to capture many diverse dimensions of women's lives – their sensibilities, sexuality, subjectivity and their relation to men as well as other women. But in spite of these earnest efforts, commercial films could not free itself from the objectification of woman and reduce women to mere eye candies and sex objects onscreen. Focussing on the point of stereotypical representation of women on screen, Butalia suggests that focus should be shifted towards balancing the image of women. The existence of male gaze and its effect on women and representation can be explained with these quoted lines from 'Places Far from Ellesmere', a poem by Aritha Van Herk,

“you want to read yourself (in a mirror) and anna a

Fictional mirror of a male reading a woman.

Perhaps you can un/read her, set her free.”

Indian cinema creates a vibrant dichotomy when portraying its women: the reckless and the docile one. Makers show negligible interest and effort in portraying women who are acting according to the situation; being bad or good as the situation demands. There is a dire need of portraying real women, who are prone to the flaws, on physical, mental and moral level. Real women are fighting various demons every day and yet emerging victorious. The substance of a woman's character is missing in the portrayal in cinema. They and their issues and relationships are trivialised and are often voiced and decided by men, deeming women not just physically but intellectually inferior. It is important to talk about agency when we are talking about women's position and representation with respect to power and gender relations in the patriarchal framework. Agency is the capacity of individual human to have free will and make independent decisions. The film makers still do not associate intellect, agency, decision making to their heroines.

In a society that is dunked in patriarchy, important decisions are taken by the men of the house. This man can be anyone, even the one who is noy immediately related, any male

from the extended family can assume the responsibility of the house. The denial of vesting power of decision making to women is serves to crumble their self-esteem and confidence, leaving them feeling less important. By limiting women's physical, economic, sexual social and political economy effects decision making process.

The position and representation of women within the dominant media outlets are tenacious concerns of the society. The scarcity and negative stereotyping of the female participation reinforces the inequality of the sexes. Research has begun to emphasise on woman's life and identity. The image of women in cinema was one of the central concerns of the second wave feminism that happened in 1960s-1970s, critiquing women's image and role of women in the film industry (Jackson and Jackie 1990). It has aided in change in the perception of women have made towards achieving the goals of equality in recent decades.

Film makers are indeed trying to make women centric films covering the issues and realities of women, but it lacks nuances. The relationship between women is not given much impetus. They either nullify the chances of women being friends and each other's support systems or they dismiss their bond as mere gossip. The lives of onscreen women revolve around the men of their lives and are evidently controlled by it. Gender plays an important role here too. Male friendships are highlighted and rather glorifies. We can take the classic case of Jai and Veeru from *Sholay* (1975), to recent times '*Sonu ki Titu ki Sweety*' (2018) while these movies aim to capture the essence of male friendships or 'bromance', the portrayals of female friendships haven't gained much seriousness. The bars are set too high and unrealistic with movies and web series like *Four more Shots Please* (2019), *Veeray Di Wedding* (2018) and a saga of four rich women . The problem with theses web series were that they failed to capture the backgrounds of women, of the middle class, where amidst all the forces that try to pin them down, they still bounce back, and in the journey, befriend other women. They show solidarity with other women, proving that a life without male support and interference is possible. A much more serious depiction of bonds between women can be seen in movies like *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015) and *Parched* (2015) which try to tell a tale about female friendships.

Majority of the movies fail to capture the solidarity and sisterhood amongst women. Sisterhood was an important feature of the second wave of Feminism. It aimed at providing a collective sense of purpose and unity through the demonstration of solidarity of the feminist movement. (Morgan, 1970). The emphasis of Sisterhood is on the horizontal relationships between women rather vertical; that consciously avoids the inherent hierarchy in the mother

daughter trope, which is grafted in the second or third wave distinction (Henry,2004). The contestations of the notions of sisterhood is more in the third wave as it includes intersectionality, that exposes the power dynamics between and amongst women, but also the critiques of men towards the feminist movements and feminism's wider goals.

The feminist film theorists debated a lot over the representations of women their problems, relationships and sensibilities in cinema. This complex relationships between cinema and women are an important area in the third world feminism and a substantial literature in itself.

With time, cinema has also made its effort to catch up but however the depiction of female friendships still needs a lot of work. In majority of movies that we see we can see the practice of pitting women against one another woman, making them compete mostly for the love of men. Friendships that can better be called a 'caricature' can also be seen, commonly known as The Mean Girl Gang, where in there is one girl who leads the group, while others follow. Needless to say, there is nothing genuine about this; the world of these girls revolves around a man yet again. Instead of genuine connection, one only finds bullying, verbal put downs, backstabbing and gossiping here. Films on friendships of women are remarkable for its scarcity; in spite of attempting to portray female kinships it is proudly circulated those two women cannot be friends. This has been a patriarchal notion internalised by us as a society, keeping us successfully distracted from the real issues that bind us.

Thus, the paper is an earnest attempt to locate and celebrate silent but powerful solidarity between women in Umesh Bisht's *Pagglait* (2021). *Pagglait* (2021) is a Hindi language black comedy encircling funeral politics around the death of Astik Srivastav and after effects on the life of his wife Sandhya played by Sanya Malhotra. Astik Srivastav doesn't have a face in the movie; but all the important action revolves around him. Astik dies in five months of marriage, leaving his parents Usha and Shivendra devastated. The extended family, who is apparently here to mourn the loss, but instead has hidden motives inspired by greed and create a mess in general.

Interestingly, Sandhya cannot be seen grieving dramatically or even for the sake of grieving at the loss of her husband. Sandhya accepts rather surprisingly to her friend Nazia, that she isn't feeling sad, and that she was devastated when her cat dies, but at the death of Astik, she doesn't feel a thing.

But the story escalates when Sandhya finds out about Aakansha, Astik's ex-girlfriend, whom he loved deeply but couldn't get family approval to take their relationship to the next level. Sandhya is angered that this thought that her husband cheated on her. She confronts Aakansha about the affair and wants to know more about it. With every revelation, she realises how Astik never loved her and had always been inclined to Aakansha. She also accuses both of them of adultery, but learns otherwise.

The audience may have expected a huge showdown between the ladies; where Aakansha's character would be antagonised or assassinated and whereas Sandhya would get to play the poor destitute widow, whose husband had cheated on her. But the story progresses otherwise. Amidst all the family drama that goes on, where Sandhya is ready to be remarried to another brother of the same family who claims to love her, but insurance money remains the main motivation. Sandhya makes an unpredictable move: to run away, start over and to live a life dictated by the terms of none other than but her.

She leaves letters for people she cares about, leaves the money that Astik left on her name and promises to take care of Astik's parents just like Astik did. Before she leaves, she has a conversation with the grandmother, her silent supporter all the while, where Sandhya says that she has finally found the right path and that when women get sense, they are usually called nonsense/ mad. "*jab ladki log ko akal aata hai na toh sab unhe paggalait hi kehte hai*"

Working is still considered a hobby when it comes to women. Female ambition is neither appreciated nor encouraged. Times may have changed where people have adopted comparatively modern approach towards women but still are weak enough not to stand a woman who has a mind of her own such women are deemed unfit because of their mismatch with men of similar temperament.

The protagonist Sandhya also suffers from the same prejudice. In spite of being good at academics, she is not encouraged to work. She is bound to a loveless marriage and soon after the demise of her husband the families all ready to give her into another marriage, just for the insurance claim. Aakansha motivates her, not directly by giving her long speeches, but just seeing, observing and learning from Aakansha inspires Sandhya to be independent not just financially but in every way possible. She realises as long as she stays here, her life will be seen as everyone else but her.

Anu Celly in her analysis of the aspects of women representation in popular Indian cinema with the help of semiotics and psychoanalytic approach asserted that the image of

women that is shown in cinema is not the reality of her life. The functions and realities of women are dependent influenced by customs, myths and rituals. She asserts on the trope of victimization of woman's life and image. This is due to the male gaze that control the subjectivities and sexualities of women and reduce it to mere object. Satyajit Ray's *Devi* (1960) which is considered as very progressive for its time when it comes to women's representation, also used myth as a normal paradigm to construct the ideal woman.

On the contrary to all this, Sandhya is but a normal girl, and her depiction is much closer to a Indian girl next door. Society may have tried to bind her, but she is free in her own way. She is not bound by customs, rituals or myth. She cannot bring herself to grieve her dead husband. Family consoles themselves by labelling her non-conforming behaviour as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She craves for spicy food which is not acceptable due to the post death rituals in the Hindu religion. She is definitely not a victim. She is not a blind acceptor of the fate that everyone wants to keep writing for her.

In *Pagglait* we already have a depiction of a typical friendship through Nazia and Sandhya but what sets *Pagglait* apart is the relationship between Sandhya and Aakansha, two women who are linked by the man whose death unravels a twisted relationship between the two ladies: lover and wife. It is already discussed; Indian cinema celebrates competition and enmity more between the heroine rather than their friendships. A situation where another woman exists between a couple, either of the women are villainised, mostly the 'other' woman rather than questioning the man's integrity, plotlines find a way to locate loopholes in either of the women. Maybe the wife wasn't dutiful, or in case of the other woman, she is directly attacked on her character. Thus, again being a result of male gaze, films and film makers act as a practitioner of pitting women against woman. Any form of solidarity is not encouraged; because if they don't get along, they will fight and win against patriarchy.

The notion of "other woman" needs to be deconstructed, reconstructed and rewritten. There needs to be a language untainted from adultery for her description removing her from the distinct moral and social framework. These women are described as "mistress"; the "other woman", "cheating wife" are usually deemed as evil and immoral, placed against the connotation of opposites and double standards representing wider social attitude. The language of adultery is gendered; harsher for women. The "other woman" is therefore reduced to being marginal within a text.

Sandhya initially is angry with Astik as she presumes that Astik has been cheating the whole time. She tries to know more about the relationship between Astik and Aakhansha. While Aakhansha grieves like an ex-lover, breaks into tears, tears that never came to Sandhya, who does not know what to make of a relationship that ended before existing. In a world that could have easily turned them against each other, they turn to each other for comfort and find an uncanny and delightful companionship; of mutual trust and respect.

Audience habituated to the patterns of in such plotlines may have prophesied a faceoff between the ladies, but Sandhya is able to move past the grudges she holds against the ex-lovers, leading to her, not just to the symbolic salvation of Astik, but also her own emancipation.

Sandhya finds an uncanny friend in Aakhansha, whom she admires and is jealous of in equal measures. Aakhansha is all that Sandhya could never be. Her anger and frustration come out in little outbursts. Her anger is also directed towards Aakhansha's but soon she realises that neither Aakhansha, nor Astik nor she is to blame. All of it had been a pile up of the emptiness she had in her because of her unfulfilled dreams. The bond between the two ladies is unusual. Aakhansha plays a catalyst in Sandhya's freedom from the societal rules.

Sandhya meets Aakhansha before leaving apologises for her outburst, hug it out as the former flies away towards her freedom, a gesture of solidarity that we all would like to retain and want to see more of. Female friendships and communities play an important role in both feminist movement and the development of woman's self. The experiences lessons that women learn from their life and struggles in very valuable considering their existence that is deliberately made subordinate in the patriarchal framework. They lessons contribute to a woman's self-development and ensure a successful deconstruction of an internalised misogynist mindset. Thus, Sisterhood and friendship serve as powerful liminal spaces.

In his book "*The Politics of Women's Liberation*" (1975), E. Freeman asserts "women came together in small groups to share personal experiences, problems, and feelings. From this public sharing comes the realization that what was thought to be individual is, in fact, common: that what was thought to be a personal problem has a social cause and a political solution" (p. 181). The issues of sexism bind these women; thus, coming together merely helps them realise that they are fighting a common enemy, who just comes in front of them in different forms and without justification. Besides healing women psychologically. These discussions promote a

development of a strategy of resistance; that helps them combat such oppression through commitment towards self and mass struggle.

Changing these sexist attitudes of women for each other remains one of the important goals of Feminism. The delicate competition and hatred that women conduct amongst and towards themselves is mostly with respect to the men in their lives. On the other side, encouragement of women sympathising and according with each other's' aims, pains, laughter and dreams, cheers and laughter, celebrating their success and achievement.

This movie is titled *Pagglait* which means mad. This movie doesn't outrightly preach woman rights but is a satirical take on the society with its women. The movie is basically coming in the genre of funeral politics and black comedy. People are not genuinely sad for someone's loss, rather seek opportunity in that as well. It is just a pretense to fulfil ulterior motives.

Recognition of the rights and abilities of women is essential for the development and empowerment of women. But most important it is necessary for women realise their own capabilities and potential as these aids in strengthening self-image and provides them the confidence that they need to go on with their lives. Thus, the female centric movies need to focus on the women, their struggles and their moments, their struggles and their moments of resistance and strength. Showing character growth of women is very important, in which sisterhood plays an important role. We must dismantle this notion that women can be only competitors. Woman too are capable of forming genuine friendships, just like the male friendships full of laughter, jokes, bonding, solidarity, mutual empowerment, forgiveness and most importantly a shared lived experience.

While reconciling black woman's identity by inclusively prompting Sisterhood's Collective power, bell hooks in her *Feminist Theory: Feminist Theory From Margin* (1984) advocates a new concept on the basis of shared strengths and reasons. This kind of woman bonding is the essence of sisterhood (43). By doing so they support each other's liberal endeavours that diverts their attention from patriarchy which is the main cause. Erikson (1993) argues that "lack woman's identity flourishes and grows stronger along with convenient integration into an appropriate society and culture, and the opposite is true, a defect in any of these elements may increase the possibility of an identity crisis" (240).

Women are made to believe that they are weak; ‘natural enemies’ and any connection between them is going to lessen their strength and experience. Hooks states, “we are taught that women are natural enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another” (43). This is precisely the reason why the values, habits, and customs are made to look like a hate inspired competition. The relations between them are only acknowledged when they turn to be instrumental to the male power. In the similar strain, Ratna Pathak Shah’s words can be quoted, wherein she commented about the hostile environment that doesn’t allow female friendships to flourish, by manipulating women themselves: “Woman has been made to become a woman’s worst enemy. Because she is the one who socialises within the family and lays down these horrible laws. These are not laws she has made. These are laws she has been told to enforce. Women has been used as watchdogs of patriarchy since centuries” (Ratna Pathak Shah). Thus, the bond of sisterhood enables women to circumvent oppression and gain freedom.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her famous Book length essay “We All should be feminists” (2014) and also a TED Talk said:

“We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man. Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Now marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support but why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don’t teach boys the same? We raise girls to see each other as competitors not for jobs or accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for the attention of men. We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are.”

This perfectly summarises everything that is wrong with the approach people have towards woman and her needs.

Expanding the scope of sisterhood, hooks (2002) say “We talked about how to combat jealousy, the politics of envy, and so on. Part of the process of becoming a feminist was to critique and change our sexist ways of seeing one another... it was about women learning how to care for one another and be in solidarity, not just when we have complaints or when we feel

victimized.” (130). when women begin to practise self-love, they never regret their choice to empower and help other women.

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