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## The changing role of women in 21<sup>st</sup> century Hindi cinema

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### Abstract

Cinema is one of the most powerful mediums of mass communication and entertainment. A combination of several arts like painting, dance, music, sculpture, puppetry, Cinema has the power to reach heterogeneous audience. Hindi cinema has been a mirror of society. Hindi cinema has reflected the socio-cultural patterns, trends, political upheavals surfacing the society. It is an agent of social change. A Woman is a very important segment of society. In fact, she forms the base of superstructure of society. One of the best ways to judge the spirit of a civilization, appreciate its strength, glory and recognize its weakness and limitations is to study the position and status of women in it. No doubt, the equality of status has been bestowed to her by the constitution but ensuring a woman's autonomy and increased participation and decision making power in family and public life is still existential. It is very sad to admit that our Indian society is patriarchal to the very core. Here men are seen as breadwinners and the role of a woman is being confined to a good homemaker. She is rarely seen as individual. Despite empowerment notions and various reforms, heinous crimes against women are on the rise. In earlier films, female experience was ignored and was given less importance. They were trapped in secondary roles and they handled with care the male ego but 21<sup>st</sup> century Hindi Films are showing various aspects in the representation of women and their multifarious role in society. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cinema is giving vent to the hidden motifs of feminine sensibilities, her quest for freedom, self-respect, dignity and her changing role in society through films like, Kya Kehna, English Vinglish, Dor, Mardaani, Thappad, Queen, Panga and many such movies. Their contribution is significant in making the society aware of women's needs and aspirations.

**Keywords:** cinema, women, patriarchy, mass communication, empowerment

### Introduction

Cinema is one of the most powerful mediums of mass communication and entertainment. It has a wider catchment area. As it combines both the audio and visual aspect, it is appealing both to the eyes and ears. Not only this, as it is enjoyed and understood both by the elite and rural, it has a strong magnetic hold on the minds of people. Hindi Cinema has the power to reach heterogeneous audience. In a single cinema hall, hundreds of people can enjoy a film. Even the illiterate people can understand what is happening on screen, relate with characters, style and its visual grammar. Apart from the moral, emotional involvement with characters, Films also have a psychological impact on the audience. The roles of various characters, storyline, their language, style leave an indelible imprint on the audience. They are able to relate with it.

Hindi cinema has been a mirror of society. Hindi cinema has reflected the socio-cultural patterns, trends, political upheavals surfacing the society. It is an agent of social change. The films express ideas, social messages and information to the people irrespective of their race, creed or color. Late Prime Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru recognized the potential of Cinema from the very beginning itself and wanted to use the medium in a way which benefits the society. In a personal communication dispatched to the organizers of the first Indian Motion Pictures Congress in Bombay in 1939, he asserted:

I am far from satisfied at the quality of work that has been done. Motion pictures have become an essential part of modern life and they can be used with greater advantage for educational purposes. I hope that the industry will consider now in terms of meeting the standards and of aiming at producing high class films that have educational and social

values. Such films should receive the cooperation and not only of the public but also of the state.

A Woman is a very important segment of society. In fact, she forms the base of superstructure of society. One of the best ways to judge the spirit of a civilization, appreciate its strength, glory and recognize its weakness and limitations is to study the position and status of women in it. To study the status of women, it is necessary to discuss the position of women in different eras. During the Vedic period, the position of women was quite satisfactory. They enjoyed freedom and equality. We find many enlightened women such as Gargi, Matreyi, Lopamudra, Ghosha who composed the hymns of Rig Veda. Women studied in the Gurukuls. According to Upanishads, a woman has been regarded as companion of men. No religious rites were performed in their absence. They had the right to choose their life partner through Swayamvar Ceremony. During the Epic Age, Men were considered inadequate without women. We all know that Lord Rama had to make Sita of Gold for the Ashwmedha Yagna. During the Epic age, most of the women were well educated and well versed in fine arts like Draupadi, Uttara and even trained in martial arts like Amba. Women gave counsel to men in social, political and religious life like Satyawati, Kunti. Position of women declined during the Post Vedic period. Many social evils like Pre-Puberty Marriage, Purdah system, Infanticide, Polygamy prevailed. Due to Child Marriage, girls were denied access to Education. There was patriarchal controlling over every aspect of women's personality. During the Buddhist period, the position of women improved a bit. They had the freedom to join sangha known as Bhikshukni Sangha. By this they got avenues of cultural and social service and opportunities to develop their personalities. We have heard about Amrapalli who was well versed in dance and was blessed by Mahatma Buddha and took salvation. Sanghamitra went to Ceylon to preach Buddhism. During the Medieval Period, women's status deteriorated due to Muslim invasion. Several restrictions were imposed on her like Purdah, Pre-Puberty marriage. During the British Period, two major movements raised the question of equal status of women. One was the Social Reform Movement and the other was Nationalist Movement. Eminent social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Vidyasagar, Pandita Ramabai started various movements towards emancipation of women. Sharda Act (1929), Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), Maternity Benefit Act (1961), Equal Remuneration Act (1976) and many such were constant endeavours of reformers. Our History books mention the names of glorious great men like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel but we do not know the fact that there were 15 ladies who took part in framing the Indian Constitution. Though it's not a big number but a paramount one. We fail to find the names of such renowned women like Ammu Swaminathan, Dakshyani, Velayudhan, Begum Aziz Rasul, Renuka Roy, Durgabai Deshmukh, Hansa Mehta, Purnima Banerjee, Sucheta Kriplani, Leela Roy, Malti Chaudhry, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Sarojini Naidu and many such. Ammu Swaminathan was a true feminist. She formed the women's India Association along with great personalities like Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu. Dakshyani was India's first Dalit women graduate who slammed untouchability.

No doubt, the equality of status has been bestowed to her by the constitution but ensuring a woman's autonomy and increased participation and decision making power in family and public life is still existential. It is very sad to admit that our Indian society is patriarchal to the very core. Here men are seen as breadwinners and the role of a woman is being confined to a good homemaker. She is rarely seen as individual. Despite empowerment notions and various reforms, heinous crimes against women are on the rise. The Brutal Delhi Gang Rape of Nirbhaya and Disha of Telengana, Scarlett Keeling's Case in Goa, Acid Attack of Laxmi Aggarwal are just few illustrations and gender sensitive society is the need of the hour. Hindi cinema, which is a very strong audio visual medium, is portraying myriad shades of a women's personality through 21<sup>st</sup> century Hindi films to sensitize the youth to respect women. 21<sup>st</sup> century Hindi Cinema is celebrating both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. We need such movies to create awareness.

21<sup>st</sup> Century Cinema is giving vent to the hidden motifs of feminine sensibilities, her quest for freedom, self-respect, dignity and her changing role in society through films like, Kya Kehna, English Vinglish, Dor, Mardaani, Thappad, Queen, Panga and many such movies. Through such films, the society has started realizing that autonomy is not merely a liberal masculine ideal but a basic need for freedom of thought and action for women also. Women directors of 21<sup>st</sup> century films are also making a significant contribution. They are bringing a fresh perspective with a diversity of mind boggling concepts. Today cinema is riding on the wave of new generation women directors like Meghna Gulzar, Zoya Akhtar, Ashwini Iyer Tiwari, Gauri Shinde, Farah Khan and many such are coming on the forefront by identifying the problems of women folk and portraying their changing role in society by describing them onscreen in a vivid manner.

In earlier films, female experience was ignored and was given less importance. They were trapped in secondary roles and they handled with care the male ego but 21<sup>st</sup> century Hindi Films are showing various aspects in the representation of women and their multifarious role in society. Kya Kehna" was directed by Kundan Shah in 2000 and was written by Honey Irani. It stars Preity Zinta, Saif Ali Khan and Chandrachur Singh in lead roles. The movie has radically shifted the terms of discourse about "autonomy", "Patriliny". The heroine is a brave, gusty woman. Under the circumstances in which Priya became pregnant during college, with that man refusing to marry her, she fights against pressures of Patriarchal society. "Lajja" was written and directed by Raj Kumar Santoshi in 2001. It is a film that has a strong message to deliver. Women's plight can be changed only when women take their fate in their own hands. The film very poignantly depicts the plight of women in patriarchal framework through the lives of four women characters ironically named as Vaidehi, Maithili, Janki, Ramdulaari and; all the versions of Sita portrayed onscreen by Manisha Koirala, Mahima Chaudhary, Madhuri Dixit and Rekha. The film highlights issues like, Dowry, Rape, need for Education and self-reliance for women.

"Dor" was directed and written by Nagesh Kukunoor in 2006. It stars Ayesha Takia (Meera), a Rajasthani Hindu woman and Gul Panag (Zeenat) a strong build Muslim

woman who can go to any extent to save her husband's life. Dor is the journey of the struggle of Jeenat and empowerment of Meera to rise above the veil of patriarchal dichotomy. *"English Vinglish"* was directed by Gauri Shinde and was released on 5 October 2012. It stars Sri Devi and Adil Hussain in the lead roles. The movie depicts the struggle of Shashi Godbole to get respect from her spouse and children as she is not able to speak English. The movie depicts her journey of self-reliance and self-confidence. The movie contributes towards women emancipation.

*"Queen"* was released on 7 March 2014 and directed by Vikas Bahl. It Stars Kangana Ranaut and Rajkumar Rao in the lead roles. It is Rani's journey of inner exploration from darkness into the light. Rani is a story of a small town girl who is dumped by her fiancé a day before the wedding. Instead of sulking, she decides to go alone on her honeymoon. The movie shows how a woman can be strong and soft depending upon the situation.

*"Dangal"* was directed by Nitesh Tiwari and was released on 23 December 2016. It Stars Aamir Khan, Fatima Sana Shaikh, Sanya Malhotra and Sakshi Tanwar in the main roles. The film voices a pertinent question that a daughter is no less than a son in any respect and the film promotes Gender Equality. The movie depicts the struggle of a Father to fight against oppression of all sorts for his daughters Geeta and Babita to make them World Champions. *"Nil Battey Sannata"* was directed by Ashwini Tiwari Iyer and was released on 22 April 2016. The movie depicts a person's right to dream and change their lives irrespective of social status. Apeksha ie Apu is an unmotivated student who has managed to reach SSC year in school despite lack of interest in studies. Troubled by her daughter's indifferent attitude, Chanda, Appu's mother enrolls in Appu's school so that she can learn Maths and tutor Apu. The duo finally finish their SSC Year together. Few years later, Apu finally clears her UPSC Civil Service Exam interview and passes it successfully.

*"Secret Superstar"* was directed by Advait Chandan and was released on 19 Oct, 2017. The film stars Zaira Wasim and Meher Vij and Aamir Khan in the lead roles. It is the story of Insia Malik, a 15 year old teenager who aspires to be a singer. She shares a great bond with her mother Najma who is a victim of domestic violence. The film deals with social issues like Gender Equality and domestic violence. The screen fades to a message dedicating the movie "To Mothers and Motherhood".

*"Chhapaak"* was directed by Meghna Gulzar and was released on 10 Jan 2020. The movie voices to stand up against the heinous crimes against women especially Acid Attacks. The movie portrays a realistic depiction of the brutal aftermath of acid attack survivor Laxmi Agarwal who was burned with acid in New Delhi in 2005. The movie stars Deepika Padukone as Malti and Vikrant Massey in the lead roles. No doubt her face is burnt and distorted but her zeal, courage; her undying spirit helps her to fight for justice for those like herself. *"Thappad"* was directed by Anubhav Sinha and was released on 28 Feb 2020. It stars Taapsee Pannu and Pavail Gulati in the lead roles. The movie is a potent and resounding slap on the stereotypical notions of Patriarchy. Amrita aka Amu's smooth transition from smiling self-subordination within a marriage to a self-enlightened woman who takes a stand against domestic violence makes the movie an introspective piece of work. That single slap from her husband turns into an eye opener.

It draws her attention to everything that is unfair in their marital relationship. Contemporary Hindi films are helping us find out those patriarchal values which dominate the Indian society, controls, command the lives of women. Their contribution is significant in making the society aware of women's needs and aspirations.

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