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Woman in a superman universe: A case study of women characters in the Bahubali franchise

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Abstract

The Bahubali franchise is an epitome of native values and the conventional way of storytelling which created the history of Indian Silver Screen. The most common portrayal of women, particularly of young ones, in Indian cinema is that of "Damsels in Distress". The aim of this research paper is to sketch the evolution and emergence of power-packed female characterization in India cinema which has been traditionally male-centered. The paper will analyze this new dimension by evaluating the formidable presence of women character in Bahubal Franchise, one of the commercially and critically most successful film series of all times. The four female characters; Sivagami (Ramya Krishnan), Devasena (Anushka Shetty), Avantika (Tamannaah) and Sanga (Rohini) will be included among those few powerful, appealing and mesmerizing portrayals in India Cinema. The females of this franchise can be regarded as an inspiration for future cinematic representation.

Keywords: Women in films, cinematic values, gaze, portrayal

Introduction

Literature and cinema are two widely acknowledged sources of getting ideas about norms and cultural values of any society and culture. The important role of cinema can be easily gauged with the help of the metaphor of a mirror. Just as a mirror reflects the truthful image, cinema also echoes the state of a society in its all dimension. Cinema is what society is and also what it aims to be. This metaphor can be considered as the most appropriate and effective way of comprehending the essentiality of cinema in our lives. As the noted film maker Gulzar has pointed out,

"Cinema brings life to characters, stories, scripts and books. At times, cinema talks louder than literature and short stories. It makes characters real..."

Since the beginning of cinematic depiction, the central focus has been only one major figure, that of the hero and the entire story revolves around him. Other characters in a movie are treated as of lesser value. The female characters are always marginalized and are never considered valuable or are never provided with substantial presence in Indian theatrical performances. The most common portrayal of women, particularly of young ones, in Indian cinema is that of "Damsels in Distress". These damsels in distress are always presented like insubstantial shadows who entirely rely on the men in their lives for everything. Men are provided the God like status by these women and they seek help from their so called 'Parmeshvar' in each and every situation. The most widely used phrase, "Hey Bhagwan mere pati-parmeshvar ko mujhe bhane ke liye bhej do" can make this sense crystal clear. Women are presented with similar stereotypes since ages.

But the angle of camera is slightly shifting and in recent times, women characters have been manifested with some powerful traits that were not witnessed earlier in Indian Cinema. Vidya balan, a renowned actor highlighted this aspect during an interview when she said, "I think ninety-five percent of the portrayal is still stereotypical and only five percent portrayals are attempting something different, more realistic like 'Bobby' (Film Bobby Jassoss)"

In past few years, this mirror metaphor of cinema has been transformed into a fragmented one, as it has attempted to reflect all sort of shades through different characters. Even though the movie is still largely about a single character, efforts are being made to bring forth all the characters properly in the main storyline.

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The aim of this research paper is to sketch the evolution and emergence of power-packed female characterization in Indian cinema which has been traditionally male-centered. The paper will analyze this new dimension by evaluating the formidable presence of women character in Bahubali Franchise, one of the commercially and critically most successful film series of all times. The Bahubali franchise is an epitome of native values and the conventional way of storytelling which created the history of Indian Silver Screen. It is not only a commercially but also culturally an important art piece as it has revived all those aspects that were generally ignored by us. It has created a wave and also transformed the theorem and tactics of filmic representation. Traditionally the females have been included in a movie just to be a medium of objectification and sexualization, but this movie has attempted to rejig the cinematic conventions by allowing the women characters to display virtues other than that of feminine charm and sex appeal. The women characters in the series are shown as independent beings capable of having their own existence and paving their own paths.

There are rare exceptions of those movies that are women centric, and Bahubali is one among such films. Although, Bahubali is based on a central macho male character, but the fact which has added new jewel in its prestige is its powerful representation of female characters. All the female characters of this series display a perfect fusion of power, grace, courage and boldness of taking decisions. They possess not only feminine grace but the ability to transform this grace into a tenacious resolution according to the need of the moment. Whatever the role, be it of a mother, a Rajmata, a ruler, a foster-mother, a lover, a warrior, a mentor, she adapts and excels herself. The most interesting fact about this movie is the time in which the movie has been set. It is not based in contemporary modern times but in mythical periods, which highlights that India has this norm and custom of strong and mighty women always.

This research paper intends to study the movie series Bahubali: The Beginning (2015) ^[1] and Bahubali: The Conclusion (2017) ^[4] through female point of view and it will try to showcase the powerful presentation of four different female characters; Sivagami (Ramya Krishnan), Devasena (Anushka Shetty), Avantika (Tamannaah) and Sanga (Rohini).

Sivagami: The very first figure that is presented on the screen in the movie is that of Sivagami, struggling to rescue an infant from a group of soldiers. Although, she is brutally injured by an arrow thrust in her back yet she puts all her strength in protecting the child from the soldiers. It seems that the sole intention of the soldiers, is to kill the both. Despite being severely injured, Sivagami kills all the soldiers. The fire like resolution of Sivagami's personality of handling such situation boldly, smartly and calmly can be easily seen in this scene. In spite of seemingly unsurmountable hurdles, she succeeds in saving the life of the infant. It is later revealed that the child (Mahendra Bahubali) is the heir of Mahishmati kingdom; the son of Late King Amarendra Bahubali and Grandson of Rajmata; Sivagami. Later the story is presented in flashbacks from the point of view of Kattappa; the most devoted follower of Mahishmati Kingdom. The character of Sivagami is given various shades such as a mother, who equally treats both her son Bhallaladeva, and her nephew Amarendra Bahubali; a

political governess, who knows how to maneuver her political strategies against the malcontents of the royal court; as a shield who cognizes how to protect her Mahishmati Kingdom from all sort of contenders whether external or internal throne hunters in the absence of a king, and finally as a dynast who knows how to accomplish all her commands with help of loyal Kattappa and the army and a true devotee to Mahishmati Kingdom. She can be identified as a woman of principles and it can be observed in the statement,

“Ye mera vachan hai or mera vachan hi hai shashan”.

She upbrings the infant prince and supervises the journey of Amarendra Bahubali to the throne of the Mahishmati Kingdom. She is unbiased in her motherly affection and concerns. Her dedication to the cause of her kingdom can be seen in her selfless announcement that Bahu and not her own son Bhalla would be the future king of Mahishmati. Her personality shows all the essential traits of a leader and of a ruler as she chooses the responsibility of protecting both the future king and the throne of Mahishmati Kingdom from the threats of traitors. Her selection of Amarendra as the future king of the throne over her son shows her keen observation of both the princes during the battle with the Kalakeyas; a tribe of savage warriors. When Bijjaladeva oppose her decision she boldly and firmly asserts, “Yudh me sekdon ko marne wala nayak hai lekin jo kisi ek ke bhi pran bcha le wo devta hai”. This decision has received more honor for her leader like personality that remains alert and notes each and every minute happenings around her. It is suggested by Bijjaladeva, Sivagami's husband, that the killer of Inkoshi, the Kalakeya chief, would be honored with the crown of Mahishmati Kingdom. Sivagami remains silent and gives no response to this.

With her various decisions at several points in both the movies, she acquires power, honour, elegance, and admiration. The aura and overwhelming power which she has as the vital essence of her character is unmatched and commendable. She is a perfect strategy-maker, diplomat, strong-headed and a steadfast decision maker.

In the second part of the franchise, it is revealed that both Bhallaladeva and his father Bijjaladeva secretly devise plots against Bahubali because they did not want him as the king. Their only intention was to create a rift between Rajmata and Bahu. Ultimately, both get success in breaking the trust bond between the two by proving Bahu as a great threat to Mahishmati Kingdom. And they also manipulate Sivagami and compel her to order the execution of Bahu. The real devilish intentions of the father-son duo come to light after Bahu's murder. She feels guilty for what she did with late Bahu and Devasena, but now she had no choice but to repent. She openly proclaims Mahendra, son of Amarendra as the next king of Mahishmati empire. Bhallaladeva orders his royal soldiers to assassinate both the infant prince and Rajmata Sivagami. She doesn't even care for her life to save the future king.

Devasena: She is shown as the princess of Kuntala Kingdom; a small kingdom not as great as Mahishmati empire. In the first series, she is portrayed as the victim of Bhallaladeva's atrocities in the imprisonment, captured in iron chains. But she dauntlessly prepares a pyre of small sticks for Bhallaladeva. Her belief in the power of

determination and patience is remarkable and it can be clearly noted as she has been waiting for the return of her son, Mahendra Bahubali for the last twenty-five years.

In Bahubali: The Conclusion, her first appearance on the big screen portrays her as the true, courageous fighter, who is forever ready to fight for the sake of truth. In this scene, she fights courageously in order to protect her people, their lives and their valuable stuff from the Pindaries; a tribe of intruders. The boldness of Devasena can also be observed in her refusal of Sivagami's marriage proposal to her son Bhallaladeva and states that she is a Kshatriya princess and she has the right to choose her husband. Another chief feature of her personality is that she is a skilled archer. She consistently endeavors to achieve perfection and for it she practices more and more. Everybody is stunned both by her smart and attractive personality and her skills that of an archer. She possesses such a powerful personality that successfully imprints a lasting impression on everybody. Though she is a princess, a mighty warrior, a skilled archer, yet she is a generous human being too. She raises her voice against anything that is not right or can't be tolerated. In a scene in the movie, she punishes Sena Nayak, by cutting his fingers of the hand, who attempts to molest her dignity. This demonstrate that she is not a typical Indian woman who can be easily tamed and molested. After evaluating her character, she can be considered as a stereotype breaker even in mythical times and can be termed as an epitome of intelligence, determination, perseverance and progressiveness.

Avanthika (Tamannaah Bhatia): The character of Avanthika is also one of the powerful characters of the franchise. She has been shown as a member of a fighter troupe that waged a war to the release Devasena who is in the custody of Bhallaladeva in Mahishmati Kingdom. She is a sword fighter and with her sword moves she proves herself capable of shouldering the responsibility of releasing Devasena from the clutches of Bhallaladeva. Earlier, the Sardar of the troupe refuses to include her to be the part of the chosen soldiers due to a tattoo painted by Shivdu on her hand. She, in a fierce voice, addresses the Sardar by asserting, and compels him to permit her.

“Kayarta ke nhi hai mere ye aanshu, or peeda ke to bilkul bhi nhi, ye mera raqt h to khol kr bhap ban gya or meri aankhon se bah nikla, agr in aanshuo ki aanch aap tk pahunch rhi hai, to mujhe jaane dijiye”

In spite of her bold, powerful portrayal, there is a courtship-scene in which Avanthika's warrior like demeanor is transformed by Shivdu to that of typical stereotyped beautiful woman's elegance. Like a conventional heroine, she fell for the charm of Shivdu and almost forgets the spark of a warrior. But the initial depiction of her in Bahubali: The Beginning can be remembered as a powerful symbol of women.

Sanga (Rohini): Apart from the magnificent characterization of Sivagami, Devasena and Avanthika, the movie also has another illustrious woman character Sanga that is conspicuous by her grace and fortitude. In the first part of the series she is shown as the foster mother of Shivdu aka Mahendra Bahubali. she finds him as an infant in the

water of Ganga River and raises him as a fighter with her husband, the chief of the tribe. The name Shivdu/shiva has been given to him by her. Sanga is shown as an authoritative personality similar to that of Sivagami or it can be said that she holds the same aura among her tribe that was possessed by Sivagami in Mahishmati Kingdom. Her commands cannot be refused by anyone in her tribe, not even by her husband. This can be easily grasped in the scene, in which she orders the tribes men to seal the cave forever by giving warning to them,

“Jo meri bat nhi manega mai uski gardan paoon tale kuchal dungi”.

The depiction of her powerful position in the tribe is a rare demonstration on the big screen in India.

Conclusion

After interpreting Bahubali Franchise through the feminist prism, it can be concluded that the representation of female characters is devoid of stereotypical depiction to a great extent. The above discussed four characters can be included among those few powerful, appealing and mesmerizing portrayals in India Cinema. These two movies can be termed as an attempt of S.S. Rajamouli and the script writer to eradicate the cliché beliefs regarding the role of women in any motion picture. This franchise can also be termed as a restoration of female characters in Indian cinema. All the major females of the series are exhibited as a perfect combination of power, courage, unbeatable confidence, individuality, valor and fearlessness. Though there are some elements that are reflection of typical characterization of women, but overall, the females of this franchise can be regarded as an inspiration for future cinematic representation.

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