

The Neoliberal Appropriation of Feminist Ideas: A Critical Analysis of Gender Representation in Contemporary Media in India

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Abstract

Historically, media have been instrumental in raising awareness and promoting gender equality, but with the advent of neoliberalism, its transformative potential is diverted. This paper examines the role of media in shaping discourse around gender issues, particularly in the context of neoliberalism. The paper provides commentary on the current discourse on gender in media, particularly in contemporary Hindi movies. The paper is based on the textual analysis of the five purposively selected Hindi movies; 'Aisha', 'Veere di Wedding', 'Tanu weds Manu', 'Manmarziyan' and 'Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga'. It is observed that these movies have women-based story lines where women empowerment, freedom, and agency are the recurring themes. However, the same themes are co-opted and diluted through a symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and media via promoting conspicuous consumption, consequently reinforcing the existing power structures that needed to be questioned. The paper interrogates how media exploit ideas like freedom, agency and liberation, on the lines of the normative patriarchal consumerist culture. The paper critically analyses the neoliberal media landscape with its deeply entrenched consumerist values, which has consequently commodified feminism and reduced it to another marketable and sellable product. The paper also questions the sanitised portrayal of gender in Indian media, particularly in Indian movies, which tends to overlook intersecting factors like caste, class, sexual orientation, etc.

Keywords: Agency, Commodification, Heteronormativity, Neoliberal Media, New Femininity.

Introduction

International Women's Day is celebrated to advocate gender justice and equality. However, in recent years, corporates and brands have used the day as an occasion to promote products and services targeting women, coopting as a marketing opportunity to sell their products. It is to be noted that the day, which is supposed to create awareness of structural inequalities based on gender, is reduced to an opportunity to grab deals and sell, paradoxically solidifying the same inequalities. This appropriation and cooption are not only done by companies and brands alone, but the popular media is also entrenched in such practices, which is supposed to play a catalytic role in bringing social issues to the larger public. The media can be instrumental in raising critical consciousness regarding gender issues and to furthered women's causes by bringing these issues to the general masses. It can also be potentially a

powerful tool to take gender issues as 'private trouble' and translate it into a 'public issue'. The media can revisit, question and challenge rigid gender roles and empower men and women. In recent times, there has been a proliferation of movies in the Hindi film industry featuring female-centred narratives. This surge of female-centric movies in the Hindi film industry can be attributed to the growing public discourse on women, particularly on gender equality and women empowerment (1). This also has contributed to the burgeoning research interest in analyzing women's status and agency, simultaneously promoting gender-neutral entertainment. The current research path on the representation of women in media, particularly in the Hindi Film industry, notices divergent thematic orientations. The framework of Hindi movies is such that it promotes normative patriarchal values, traditional

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family structure, and female chastity, and male characters receive more prominence in the character than females (2). Power dynamics, agency, and gender equality in Hindi movies were also researched in some of the studies (3). Nijhawan, in this pursuit, observes the making of a 'new woman' in Hindi movies, and this 'new woman' is an aberration and a clear departure from the erstwhile female character, the object of desire, submissive and marginalized (3). However, the study does not explore how the creation of this 'new woman' aligns with the principles and values of neoliberalism. The historical analysis of female characters in Indian films concludes that, despite numerous changes, women still continued to be depicted as subservient (4). It is pointed out that family, marriage, and sacrifice are still the prevalent themes of Hindi movies, which are also in consonance with the patriarchal structure. Indian cinema reflects inherent biases towards marriage, thereby convoluting individual identity with marital relationships (5). Gokulsing & Dissnayake observed that portrayal of women as vamps is another depiction of women characters in popular Hindi movies. These women are shown as the exact contrast to the pious, chaste, sacrificing ideal women as wives or mothers. These women are viewed as transgressing traditional values and exhibiting a Western lifestyle. They are largely shown as sexually promiscuous, smoking, drinking and other indulgent behavior (6). Another area of research on the representation of women in Hindi cinema is centred on the objectification of women and the male gaze. Studies have emphasized that the objectification of women can largely be attributed to the reinforcement of socio-cultural stereotypes (4). Sonali & Anagha, in their study, pointed out that though there is a significant rise in strong, independent female protagonists in recent years, at the same time, stereotypes and objectification continued to be part of many mainstream films. Nevertheless, there is also a growing trend of films with women-centric narratives and with females as central characters (7). The change in the portrayal of women in Indian media is largely attributed to India's liberalisation of economic policies post-1991, which subsequently led to significant cultural and lifestyle changes triggered by the economic reforms of 1991 (8, 9). In spite of the growing

scholarship on the intersection of women and media in India, the conjunction of women, media and neoliberalism, particularly in the context of Hindi movies, is an under-researched area. The present article attempts to look at the representation of women centric Hindi movies that have been influenced by neoliberal ideology. The present media is overtly dominated by market concerns and is informed by neoliberal doctrine. This neoliberal media is commercial media intrinsically linked to the global capitalist economy to promote and encourage consumerist values. Neoliberal media is based on neoliberalism, which is a set of national and international policies asserting the importance of a free market. The earlier media was primarily national with lesser market interference, which has now turned into a global commercial-media market. Consequently, feminist ideas like choice, freedom, and agency have been extensively employed to endorse the idea of modern women who willingly and assertively accept and live by the patriarchal and consumerist value system. On the superficial level, it evokes feminist ideas, but without advancing feminist goals; instead, it celebrates individual choices often linked with the consumption of commodities (10). The media has appropriated the idea of choice to the extent that it has turned structural gender issues into personal agonies. The idea of agency is conflated with instant gratification and conspicuous consumption, which celebrates market supremacy. This sense of agency paves the way for the construction of 'new femininity', which is free-spirited, oozing with confidence, and having financial and sexual agency but is paradoxically projected as emotionally and psychologically brittle and incomplete. A male protagonist often fills this incompleteness and emotional void, as shown in recent Hindi movies.

Methodology

The present paper adopts textual analysis as the methodological approach to analyse the representation of gender in Hindi movies. Through the textual analysis, the study intends to examine the construction of cinematic narratives centred on gender, reinforcing or challenging gender roles, feminist ideologies, and cultural norms. A purposive sampling is employed to select films released between 2010 and 2019. The movies

were selected on the following criteria. Films with women as the central characters or female-based storylines. Films centred on themes of gender. In this way a total five Hindi movies namely '*Aisha*' (2010), '*Tanu weds Manu*' (2011), '*Veere di Wedding*' (2018), '*Manmarziyan*' (2018), and '*Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga*' (2019) were purposively selected for textual analysis.

Results

In '*Veere di Wedding*' and '*Aisha*', the protagonists are shown going for shopping extravaganza, for luxury holidays, for spas, high-end boutiques, parlours and spas. In fact, these activities were one of the central elements of these female-centric movies. Marriage and marriage-related celebrations are other recurring themes in both movies. The portrayal of the liberated women engaged in traditional male habits like smoking, drinking, sexual advancement, and self-pleasure (more precisely, masturbation), as shown in '*Veere De Wedding*' is another emerging idea. Even the name of the movie '*Veere di Wedding*', '*Veere*', meaning brotherhood, is actually a female version of a 'bromance' movie. It shows a lack of spark and intellectual lethargy to come up with another name. The female characters in '*Manmarziyan*' and '*Tanu weds Manu*' are unapologetically feisty yet emotionally fragile and gain clarity of life's purpose after meeting the male protagonist. In these movies, the path to their psycho-social salvation is through the male characters; without them, their life seems incomplete. The female characters in '*Tanu weds Manu*' and '*Manmarziyan*' are utterly rebellious to the extent that it outweighs their intellect. In the famous towel scene in '*Tanu Weds Manu*', *Tanu* emerges in the towel in the family courtyard where the potential groom's family, along with the boy, comes to meet the girl and her family, a typical arranged marriage scenario. In this situation, walking *Tanu* in nothing but a towel is shocking to the sensibilities of any middle-class family in India. In another scene in the movie '*Manmarziyan*' the female character, while on honeymoon, is asked by one of the conjugal female relatives how everything is going. She blatantly responds that everything is fine, but her husband forgot to have a condom at the last moment. The sexual orientation as shown in '*Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga*' deals with same sex lesbian

relationship; it is remarkable to take up this issue in mainstream Hindi movies by mainstream actress. However, nowhere in the movie the two girls are shown in the frame which itself projects inherent anxiety towards lesbian relationship.

Discussion

The following recurring themes came to light through examining concepts like Choice, freedom agency and empowerment as depicted in the sampled Hindi movies.

Commodification of Feminism

The present time is witness to a marriage of convenience between neoliberalism and feminism. The celebration of this relationship leads to the commodification of feminism and is strategically used as propaganda. Whelehan has termed this as 'commodity' feminism that 'sells' feminist ideas of liberation, freedom and independence to subjugate and oppress women more profoundly but on a subtle level (11, 12). There exists a section of Indian women who are striving for gender parity, and the media would like to woo them with the correct dose of feminism. Icing the content with a splash of feminism is often done to entice women glued to their content and ultimately turn them into 'feminist' consumers. The neoliberal media is hardly interested in the epithet 'feminism'. Instead, creating a new section of the consumer is their ultimate goal. The trivialisation of feminism in media through lifestyling of feminism does not escape our attention. '*Veere di Wedding*' and '*Aisha*' display luxury brands, conflating female agency to commodity ownership where shopaholicism is not viewed as a by-product of the fashion industry but a matter of identity and buoyancy (13). When these movies relentless shopping and other market-oriented activities are questioned, they are easily shrugged off as a matter of equality to provide equal screen space to female characters and their lives. It is to be understood that for most Indian women, shopping, parlours, spas, holidays, and malls are not prominent features of their lives and don't define them. On the contrary, continuous negotiation and regular navigation through gender prejudice and male chauvinism is the everyday reality for the majority of Indian women. Depicting them in such light is a sheer celebration of consumerism and mockery of women's real issues. At the same time, the normalisation of prioritising

the higher middle-class problems as overarching women's problems is portrayed, and their consumption-driven life is projected as the pathway to emancipation (14). Paradoxically, this is celebrated as giving more screen space to women and giving equal importance to women's lives and stories in cinema. This life styling of equality is a clear departure from the feminist understanding of agency, equality and, instead, pleasure-seeking, instant gratification, and conspicuous consumption become the new mantra to define agency (15). The majority of Indian women do not identify with this mantra, and, as a result, it alienates people from feminist beliefs altogether.

Women Empowerment: An Oxymoron

An essential means of exploitation that comes in handy for the popular discourse in media is the reification of female agency and women's empowerment to economic self-sufficiency, ignoring the other significant aspects of empowerment. There is no denying that financial empowerment is essential, but assuming that financial empowerment is the only form of empowerment is equally misleading. Contestation and transformation of unequal power relationship is the key to empowerment, but ironically, the question of power is lost in the labyrinth of strategies to have financial empowerment. Another point to be noted is that our idea of empowered women is often educated, middle-class, working and higher-caste women. This indicates two issues: first, can't a poor, uneducated, non-working woman have any agency, and second, are middle-class, educated working women always in absolute control of their lives? It fails to accept, on the one hand, that poor, uneducated, Dalit, and other marginalised women can be empowered, and on the other hand, it also fails to acknowledge that educated middle-class working women can also be vulnerable. Patriarchy-induced empowerment is also something one can't miss to notice. Popular media are also full of such illustrations; for example, in movies like *'Fashion'*, *'Corporate'*, and *'Veere Di Wedding'*, women's choices to liberate themselves or to interrogate the power structure are informed by the confines of the patriarchal structure (16). In fact, the portrayal of modern Indian women as

empowered women is observed as absolute 'cosmetic' (17). Bharadwaj & Mehta, in their study, termed it as 'neo feminism', a disguise to shield traditional chauvinism (18).

Cooption of Choice

The media has co-opted the idea of choice according to neoliberal interpretation and understanding. Though it claims to celebrate the diversity of choices, what can be said to be 'chosen choices' conforms to the neoliberal mantra. For instance, 'my choice,' a two-and-a-half-minute video, where it is asserted 'to have sex in marriage or outside marriage is my choice'. This kind of choice assertion is nothing but the proliferation and promotion of sexual anarchy (19). Unmitigated freedom to make choices is also a myth. The moot question is this: how many women in India identify with this kind of choice? Everyday humiliation and discrimination are a lived reality of millions of women in India; for them, autonomy to have sexual relationships outside marriage can never be their choice. They have more pressing and pertinent forms of discrimination to deal with. Moreover, such a radicalised approach to articulate 'my choice' leads to alienation from feminist beliefs, which helps in reinforcing and maintaining the patriarchal status quo. One of the means through which neo-liberal media undertakes this exploitation is its co-option and appropriation of feminist beliefs to promote and reinforce normative culture. It has turned the feminist slogan 'personal is political' upside down into 'political is personal' (20). Women's personal, individual problems were seen in relation to women's subordinate position in power dynamics, which has now turned into an individual predicament. Choices such as women leaving their careers to raise a family started being seen as personal choices, devoid of any power dynamics. For instance, the female lead in the movie *'Sultan'*, quits her professional wrestling to raise a family. Ironically, her choice of leaving her career for her family was also celebrated as a matter of choice. In fact, her decision to leave her career was asserted as a personal choice, which a woman is entitled to, but it needs to be understood that she made this decision because society has conditioned her to do so. Her choice was informed by the normative patriarchal culture, which expects sacrificing

Indian women to leave their careers for family. The choices are made in a socially mediated universe, where how those choices are made is always more important than the content of the choices.

Construction of New Femininity

The way women are represented in these movies has actually paved the way for the construction of 'new femininity' which is free-spirited, oozing with confidence, and having financial and sexual agency, as seen in movies like *'Manmarziyan'*, *'Tanu weds Manu'*. This 'new femininity' also enjoys its potential to titillate males. They enjoy their sexual prowess to manipulate men, consequently making titillation and manipulation look invigorating on screen. Another important element is that the 'new femininity' is a complete antithesis of middle-class values and sensibilities, carrying a significant shock value. The towel scene in *'Tanu Weds Manu'* is attempted to exhibit a sense of agency by the female character, but the sense of agency cannot be achieved through this deplorable self-objectification. With such depiction, ideas like freedom, agency, liberation, etc., get exploited in a way that women themselves are participating in and chasing the normative patriarchal consumerist culture and thus inflicting self-objectification (21). In *'Manmarziyan'*, the condom conversation, it needs to be understood that in India, sexual activity within marriage is celebrated and is often discussed in families, particularly from a fertility lens. But the suggestive probe on sexual activity responded with high handedness in the movie holds shock value. The use of abusive and derogatory language projected under the disguise of realism in cinema is also trending. Women who were earlier excluded from this cinematic narrative are now equally integrated, and female characters are using cuss words with utmost ease and confidence onscreen, making it look invigorating. The portrayal of female characters as dialectically opposite to the existing social norms is equally problematic. It projects and conflates deplorable behaviour like impropriety, drug addiction, and promiscuity, which is detrimental for both men and women as fashionable and cool. A section of society experiences a 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO) if they have not indulged themselves in this behaviour.

Intersectionality

Indian movies present a sanitized and hygienic view of gender with the absence of issues of different sexual orientations and intersectionality of caste and gender. As a matter of fact, Hindi movies celebrate heteronormativity, and it thrives on heterosexuality. The absence of homosexuality is an assertion of prevalent homophobia in Indian society. The portrayal of gay relationships in *'Kal Ho Na Ho'* and *'Dostana'* was reduced to some insensitive jokes. Though *'Subh Mangal Zyada Sawdhan'* is a great attempt to critique our taken-for-grant homophobia, Indian movies are still very cautious about dealing with lesbian relationships. *'Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga'*, the way it has dealt with lesbian relationship, is in accordance with the heteronormative sensitivities of the Indians. This movie was applauded for questioning homophobia and for initiating discussion on same-sex relationships, but how it has dealt with the subject is debatable. Caste is the ubiquitous reality of Indian society; however, in our mainstream Hindi movies, we hardly find any discussion around caste. *'Masan'* and *'Mukkebaz'* are welcome moves in that direction. *'Sairat'*, a popular Marathi movie, is considered remarkable in its real portrayal of caste. However, in the Hindi remake of the same movie *'Dhadak'*, the caste question was appropriated by placing class. There is another point to note: in almost all our Hindi movies, the protagonist is of a higher caste, whether in NRI-centred movies of the 1990s and 2000 or a small-town-based protagonist. Even the recent bombardment of small-town movies is not the benevolence of the media but is the result of the nexus between neoliberalism and the media. This relationship is swayed over by the vast potential of small towns as consumers.

Conclusion

Neoliberal media appropriate feminist ideas like agency, choice and empowerment in such a way that it has commodified 'feminism'. The commodification of feminism has led to the trivialisation and lifestyling of feminism, as seen in movies like *'Veere De Wedding'* and *'Aisha'*. The economic exuberance of the female characters in the movies is celebrated as a matter of empowerment but is actually devoid of agency. In movies like *'Fashion'*, *'Corporate'*, and *'Veere Di*

Wedding' female protagonists are portrayed as women making choices to liberate themselves or to interrogate the power structure, but in reality, they are informed by the confines of the patriarchal structure (15). *'Manmarziyan'* and *'Tanu Weds Manu'* notice the construction of 'new femininity'. In this 'new femininity', the liberated women have all the customary male vices like addiction, abusive language, manipulation, and sexually promiscuous which is also an absolute departure from middle-class values and sensibilities. The question of intersectionality in movies is either absent or dealt with utmost caution. The uniform presence of caste in Indian society is also overtly overlooked in movies. With few exceptions, Hindi movies generally offer a hygienic view of gender where issues of different sexual orientations, castes, etc., are not adequately projected, keeping in mind the sensibilities of the masses. Furthermore, future empirical research could be conducted to comprehend people's attitudes towards the commodification of feminism and their opinions on issues of gender in Indian movies. Similarly, economic privilege, which is often conflated with empowerment, can be probed and studied. The portrayal of working-class women and consumerist view of feminist ideals in Indian movies could also be explored.

Abbreviation

FOMO: Fear of Missing Out.

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