



Beyond the Silver Screen: A Scrutinizing eye on the Male Gaze and Objectification of Women in Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The research article critically investigates the objectification of women on screen and the aspect of male gaze in Indian cinema. The paper also explores the evolution of women's representation in Indian popular films from the mid-20th century to the present time. It provides critical commentaries about the impact of objectification of female figure on Indian socio-cultural landscape. This research paper will definitely spark discussion about the audience's perception of societal roles and identity of women in Indian society. Through an in-depth analysis of Indian films, this paper criticizes the trend of sexualizing female body in Indian films contributing to the perpetuation of a culture of objectification. The article concludes with providing certain possible solutions to this grave issue of India society. The article emphasizes on the need of the time to represent more nuanced characterization of women in Indian cinema to break down this troubling trend.

Introduction:

Cinema is a form of visual art that mirrors as well as reinforces socio-cultural norms and beliefs. The representation of femininity in Indian cinema perpetuates patriarchal beliefs and values in a greater extend. Laura Mulvey, a prominent film theorist and critic introduced the theory of male gaze in her critically acclaimed essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), defines how the cinema represents women from a masculine point of view. She opines in her essay that the male gaze is a production of male dominated society, highlighting how men perceive women and often fetishize female



body as an object of male desire. This negative portrayal of femininity can potentially harm women's prospect and further impact the social position of women in Indian social context. The Item girl stepped into the silver screen with dancing sensations like Helene and many others. The item numbers are songs mostly full of sexual innuendoes accompanied with sensual dance moves, deliberately used to attract audience. The male gaze is like a tool for reinforcing patriarchal dominance and gender discrimination. This article is going to cast a scrutinizing eye on the male gaze in Indian films and its impact in Indian socio-cultural phenomenon.

Chapter 1: Evolution of feminine Representation in Indian Cinema

Cinema reinforces as well as challenges societal norms and values. The portrayal of femininity on silver screen has encountered a series of changes, echoing the everchanging social, economic, and cultural phenomenon of Indian society. During the initial stage of Indian cinema, female roles were mostly limited to family drama or devotional films in which actresses were generally characterized as goddess, queens or virtuous lady, strengthening traditional Indian norms, beliefs, and values. Popular films of that time delineated women as devoted and selfless. For instances, "Achhut Kanya" (1936), "Parineeta" (1953), "Mother India" (1957), "Sujata" (1959), are phenomenal in this category, showcasing women as sacrificing mother and wife ready to lay their life for the sake of their family.

The decades of 1950's and 1960's have witnessed the unprecedented rise of Indian cinema, often considered as the Golden age in the history of Indian cinema. During that period representation of women had broken stereotypical images of goddess or queen and embraced more complex and multifaceted characterization. "Pyasa" (1957), "Kagaz Ke Phool" (1959), "Mughal-e-Azam" (1960), "Guide" (1965), "Anpadh" (1962) are such films where female characters were showcased as determined and strong willed, raising voice against societal norms and traditional values.

Indian audience has witnessed a drastic transformation in the portrayal of female figure during the decades of 1970's and 80's. A few notable films of that period are "Kati Patang" (1971), "Anand" (1971), "Andhi" (1975), "Julie" (1975), "Thodisi Bewafai" (1980), "Nakhuda" (1981), "Silsila" (1981) and "Bazar" (1982) etc. Female protagonists of those films were represented as strong and independent, opposing patriarchal dominance boldly.

Though the arrival of item number has been occurred much earlier in Indian cinema, 1990 and 2000 have experienced the hype of the "Item girl" sensation with much greater extend like never before.



Women were objectified and presented as sex symbol, creating deliberate sensual appeal to attract huge audience and to generate hefty box office collection.

Chapter 2: The Arrival of the Item Girls in Indian Cinema

The item number culture in Indian cinema has been a controversial topic of argument for decades. These are generally sequence of songs with full of sexual innuendoes and seductive dance steps often featuring glamorous women in revealing attires. The item numbers are used as a tool to attract a larger audience. That is the very reason, nowadays, item numbers have become an integral part of commercial films.

In order to understand its origin, we must trace back to the early days of Bollywood films. During the 1970's, women were started featuring in Bollywood films for song and dance sequences, generally for entertainment often unrelated to the main plotline of films. Actresses like Helen created separate fanbase for their enchanting performances in item numbers, set the stage for upcoming generations of item girls. Item girls have been carrying the image of bad girl or vamp beneath the startling performances and cheering audiences.

The item number trend has undergone a significant transformation over the years when mainstream leading actresses like Madhuri Dikshit, Urmila Matondkar, Shilpa Shetty, and Raveena Tandon started appearing in item numbers without being labelled as item girls, blurring the line of demarcation between actresses and item girls. During the first decade of 21st century, actresses like Bipasha Basu, Mallika Sherawat, Katrina Kaif, and Deepika Padukone prominently appeared in item numbers, showcasing their talent in dancing and capabilities to captivate audience. For instances, “Bidi Jwalai Le”, “Jalebi Bai”, “Shiela Ki Jawani”, and “Dum Maro Dum” are notable. Although, item girls like Malaika Arora and Rakhi Sawant rose to fame for their sultry performance in many popular item numbers. Nowadays, Nora Fatehi and South actress Tamannah Bhatia gain huge popularity for their jaw-dropping performances in item numbers.

The item numbers can be seen as a spectacle of dancing talents or a celebration of feminine grace and beauty but in deep down its negative impact on audience perception is also undeniable. The most controversial aspect of item numbers is the sexualization of women's body and presentation of femininity in a negative light. Women are seen as an object of desire and entertainment for men. In these dance sequences women are represented as subordinate to men and men are portrayed as dominant one, promoting a harmful trend of misogyny. Item number culture perpetuates patriarchal societal structure



where women face gender discrimination. As a result, restrained gender roles can hinder future prospect and progress of women.

Audience perceptions have been deeply affected by these seductive item numbers featuring scantily clad women. Particularly, teens and youths who have access to these sequences will definitely shape their attitude towards women and their role in society in a negative way. This can further trigger the normalization of objectification of women and gender stereotypes in patriarchal society.

Chapter 3: The Male Gaze and Patriarchal Power Dynamics

Basically, the male gaze means the way men look at women. Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze, in her ground breaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) defines the way women are portrayed through various forms of visual arts from a masculine point of view, most commonly objectifying them. The theory sparked conversation on the way men perceive women on screen and society, often eternalizing patriarchal power dynamics. Mulvey argues that, the male gaze is a product of male dominated society, where men control power and women are sexualized and commodified (Mulvey 6). The male gaze is a resonance of social norms set by the male centric society as well as a tool to further reinforce and perpetuate these norms.

Mulvey points out three specific gazes in cinema: the camera's gaze, the audience's gaze, and the character's gaze within the film (Mulvey 17). These three distinct gazes function together to produce a compounded visual pleasure or scopophilia. The most important factor of the male gaze is the camera's gaze as the audience's perceptions of the images on screen depend on this aspect (Mulvey 17). Camera's gaze determines the audience's gaze and it is further reshaped by individual expectations and desires (Mulvey 18). The characters' gazes on screen further encourage the male gaze, as the female figures often desired and objectified by the male characters in films (Mulvey 18).

The camera gaze or the different camera angles for portrayal of female bodies and the characters' gazes in Indian films have a significant role in shaping audience's perception, empowering patriarchal norms and power dynamics in society.

Chapter 4: The Role of Male Gaze in Shaping Audience's Perceptions

The portrayal of women as a mere object of desire or as passive and submissive can promote the perpetuation of these stereotypes (Mulvey 6-8). The male gaze has a lasting effect on audience attitude and their perception of women on screen as well as in society. The representation of women on screen



based on solely feminine body type can potentially encourage misogynistic public attitudes towards women, perpetuating negative stereotypes.

Research brought the matter in light that exposure to media that objectifies women can foster negative attitude towards women, including sexism and misogyny (Kilbourne 12-15). The male gaze profoundly impacts audience perceptions towards women's roles in society and identities. The male gaze can definitely reinforce the concept that women are just objects to be stared at, ignoring individuality, autonomy, and agency.

The visual arts that sexualize women can build negative body image and it further develops low self-esteem among women (Fredrickson & Roberts 173-175). The male gaze has a lasting effect on self-perception of women, shaping the way they perceive themselves and their bodies. It also eternalizes the presumption that women's value rests upon only their body image rather than talent, intellect, or character.

The audience's collective perception is significantly triggered by the male gaze, reflecting the way audience see and perceive women in contemporary societal context. This often defines femininity in a negative light, promoting perpetuation of stereotypes and gender discrimination. This objectification compels women to perceive themselves in a low self-esteem, raising serious questions upon overall mental well-being of women.

Chapter 5: Challenging the Male Gaze and the Future of Feminine Representation in Indian Cinema

This is the need of the time to promote more and more complex representations of women in films in order to challenge the pervasive phenomenon of the male gaze in Indian cinema and society. Many gynocentric films are currently being made and gaining huge popularity, like, "Kahaani" (2012), "Queen" (2014), "Mardaani" (2014), "Mary Kom" (2014), "Neerja" (2016), "Lipstick Under My Burkha" (2017), "Thappad" (2020), "Gangubai Kathiawadi" (2022), "Darlings" (2022), "Jigra" (2023), "Vedaa" (2023), and "Mrs." (2024) etc. This kind of nuanced characterization of femininity on screen can certainly lessen the bad effects of objectification or sexualization of women.

In recent years, the female film makers have been portraying influencing female characters on screen to counter the male gaze and patriarchal notions in society. Konkona Sen Sharma, Zoya Akhtar, Alankrita Srivastava, Farha Khan, Ekta Kapoor are prominent among the rising female film-makers of today's entertainment world. They have turned the table by presenting female characters from the feminine perspectives, offering voice to the community remain suppressed and oppressed under



patriarchal dominance in traditional societal order for ages. Their diverse representations of femininity on screen create a separate and unique cinematic landscape for women, providing broader scope to recount their own stories without being overshadowed by male characters.

It is important to highlight the need of diversity and inclusivity in the case of women representation in cinema to make the society more equitable for women. Female film makers or writers and women-centric films can play a pivotal role to break the gender stereotypes, patriarchal oppressions, and traditional norms in Indian society through portraying women in multidimensional characters. There are many versatile actresses in Indian film industry but there are still more women required behind the camera to control the situation and make the wind favourable for women. The female-centric films often deal with women empowerment, struggle of women from marginalized class, women defying patriarchal dominance, women putting question marks upon traditional norms and social taboos, and women raising voice against social injustices towards them etc.

The audience preference has undergone a significant change with the advent of Ott platforms and the rising popularity of web series culture. Now people are appreciating out of the box content and diverse storytelling, not just from traditional male perspective but also from female point of view. The Ott platform highlights a futuristic prospect in the matter of women representation by democratizing more complex and nuanced characterizations for female actors by creating a parallel universe of entertainment on internet apart from mainstream film industry, opening the new horizon of limitless opportunity for female film-makers and female actors to tell their own story.

Conclusion:

Cinema as one of the most powerful art forms, influence society and its people from various aspects. The male gaze has been a prevalent cinematic phenomenon in Indian cinema for ages, setting the stage for the representation of women on screen. The male gaze shapes audience perceptions and collective attitude towards women, reinforcing patriarchal supremacy and subservient societal position of women. Behind the facade of catchy melodies and startling dance sequences there have always been a secret intention of representing women from a male perspective. These item numbers have showcased women in a negative light, as an object of desire for men, often overlooking other important aspects of femininity. Most of all, students and youths are exposed to these item numbers can potentially affect their perceptions and shape their attitude towards women. This should be considered as a serious issue in today's socio-cultural phenomenon. The female film-makers can play significant role in order to divert the current scenario of Indian cinema through the representation of femininity from female perspectives.



Web series and web films are getting popular nowadays, attracting audience across the globe. Item number culture is still existed in Indian cinema, but filmmakers must promote more diverse and multidimensional narratives along with strong and independent female characters on screen to counter societal expectations, audience perceptions, and public attitude regarding femininity in Indian society. Representations of femininity on screen is crucial as it mirror public attitude and social identity of women in Indian socio-cultural context. Female-centric films and multidimensional representations of femininity can be proved effective to mitigate the impact of male gaze on audience perceptions and collective societal expectations about women.

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