Indian Woman's Search for Identity Vis A Vis Mainstream Bollywood Cinema

Michelle Philip, Wilson College, India

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The search for a purpose in our lives, for an identity which will help us better understand the purpose of our existence has bothered Man for centuries since perhaps the Renaissance. Woman being the Second Sex, the Double oppressed has had things a lot harder than her male counterpart. Filmic representations, either positive or negative, in shaping the Indian woman's psyche: the voices of these women, their bodies and the spaces they occupy is the subject of this exploration.

Replacing the storyteller of yore, movies form the myths we tell ourselves as a culture to, 'banish contradictions and make the world understandable and therefore more habitable.' (Claude Levi Strauss). The potential of film as propaganda was recognised as far back as the First World War when it was used to manipulate the masses. In disagreeing with Munni Kabir's claim that audiences, 'know that films are not real life', a film's potential to *interpellate* to use an Althusserian term, the individual in subtle ways, forcing him/her to take a certain 'subject stance' as a person who has certain values and views, usually reiterating the interests of the ruling class or, in the case of women, reiterating the Patriarchal mind-set, cannot be overlooked. Cinema being the cheapest form of entertainment, viewership is assured, the films acceptance being perhaps, 'the most visible way in which we stage and perform the drama of self-formation.' (John Storey, Popular Culture as the Roots and Routes of Cultural Identities) Boys and girls, men and women, emulate their favourite stars-be it hairdos, fashion trends or behaviour. The medium of film represents an 'other' world and mainstream audiences live their fantasies through them and deconstructing the representations of women and men in Mainstream Bollywood Cinema and spectatorship of these films will show how together they 'construct images' promoting dominant cultural values and indirectly shaping both personal and cultural identities. In spite of the reputation of films as commercial products intended strictly to entertain, it is essential to recall Bertolt Brecht's view that, 'Good or bad, art is never without consequences'. The cinematic image needs necessarily to be deconstructed for a greater understanding of why films portraying women in bolder roles, challenging the status quo, usually meet the fate of box office flops with few exceptions and why audiences comprising of men and women alike continue to patronize films where women are portrayed as puppets of patriarchy. The nexus between roles and audience responses is therefore undeniable and forms the basis of this study.

In the Indian context, the status of woman is among the most talked about issues, the paradox being her veneration as goddess on the one hand, while still being thought of as the second, more undesirable sex, male domination stultifying her very existence. With the alarming data on female foeticide, the girl child is first of all, lucky to be born. Mainstream media powerfully peddles images of womanhood producing this creature which is then 'described as feminine' (Simone de Beauvoir). For centuries the Indian woman's sense of self has been tied to her role in society, her identity always a binary to that of man. Bollywood like Cricket, being the religion of the masses, and the actors, gods, more than any other form of media, plays a key role in moulding opinions, constructing images and reinforcing dominant cultural stereotypes. Jackie Stacey's view in 'Star-Gazing: Hollywood and Female Spectator' that, 'identification is the means by which women conspire and become complicit', in the process, is unquestionable; women, identify with women characters on screen, and generate fantasies of power, control and self-confidence within women.

Film maker Satyajit Ray captures this so effectively and poignantly in the opening scenes of his film adaptation of Tagore's short story, *The Broken Nest*, outlining the sense of emptiness in the life of the protagonist Charulatha. His choice of title for the film, *Charulatha*, makes it evident that the focus of the film is the 19th Century Renaissance Bengali woman; educated, well read and married to wealthy and successful men but still missing that satisfaction which comes from achieving a sense of self-worth. In the opening scene space and emptiness unfold, Charu is at a loose end, embroidery keeps her busy, but then the sound of the *damaru* draws her to look outside the window, in search of the origin of the sound. She finds, eventually a circus trainer with his monkey, seemingly mocking her. Metaphorically the *damaru* represents the primordial sound of Lord Nataraj drawing mankind to be a part of the dance of infinity. Charu, however, finds only bondage similar to the circus trainer and his monkey. Which begs the question, can Indian woman ever truly discover her own space where she can dance with abandon to the primordial sound of the *damaru*?

When asked by the director of 'Salt' if she would like to play Bond girl in his next film, Angelina Jolie replied, 'I want to be Bond and nothing else'. A young Indian girl recently posted on her blog, 'They told me I needed a hero, so I became one'. The woman in general and the Indian woman, in particular is a globalised, professional, modern woman, aware of her rights and privileges. Not every Indian woman however can claim this privilege thanks to the diversity of Indian culture, the urban/rural and the class/caste divide. To understand this one must trace the changing role of the heroine in Bollywood cinema and her influence on the female spectator. The role of the female spectator in shaping the representation of the hero should not be undermined and therefore this research will also try to show that although overtly traditional, the average Indian woman, far from being a passive observer, is quite aware of her sexuality and is equally beholder/ beheld(object) of the gaze.

Early film heroines, closely modelled on mythological characters, probably to give respectability to the role and justify the presence of women on screen, were almost always highly virtuous women; helpless weepy creatures whose identity and existence depended entirely on the presence of the man, be it her father, brother, husband or son. (Manu Smriti). The heroine's identity was so strongly fused to that of the hero that it often spilled over into their off screen relationship. Although married, society was willing to accept the affair provided the woman was still single. The larger-than-life roles of the leading ladies revolved around the values of love, care, discipline and obedience. The woman was depicted as the passive, submissive wife, the obedient daughter-in-law, the ideal mother; all roles demanding a sacrifice of self for the sake of country, family and community, making her something of a martyr to her own family. The institutionalization of Patriarchal values in films like *Biwi ho to Aisi*, *Pati Parmeshwar* and more recently, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam*, is undeniable. While the hero continues to be posited not as an individual but as a metaphor for the country, the woman is touted as preserver of tradition in stereotypical roles. As far back as 1957, Mehboob Khan's film *Mother India,* told of a poverty-stricken, village woman who raises her two sons against all odds, never succumbing to the advances of the village landlord. Instead she remains the epitome of virtue, displaying not only high moral values but also a strong sense of patriotism as she sacrifices her son Birju, a criminal; killing him for the greater good of the community.

Women in more substantial roles were missing since films with bold, forward, forthright women usually ended tragically with either death or disgrace. It is the view of this researcher that there has been no dearth of bold women; it would instead appear that there were weak, spineless men; men who lacked the conviction to rise to the challenges thrown by bold women. One such instance is seen in P.C. Barua's film *Devdas* (1935). Parvati or Paro, as she is usually called, the housekeeper's daughter, is the perfect, pure conventional heroine on the surface but she is willing to elope when the situation demands. In love with Devdas, the anti-hero Protagonist, she comes to his house to beg him to run away with her before she is married off to someone else by her family. Devdas asks, 'Did anyone see you enter?' instead of taking decisive action one way or another. This film also gives us Chandramukhi, the prostitute with the heart of gold and with it paved the way for the opposition of two kinds of women in film; the noble, honourable, virtuous, socially acceptable heroine and the goodhearted but social outcast prostitute who later came to be recast as the vamp.

A complete antithesis of the traditional woman/heroine is the vamp or courtesan; the wayward, reckless, irresponsible woman or *tawaif* who either dies in the end or is actively left out of the happy ending The courtesan was forced into the role but remained virginal, sacrificing her life for the hero like Rekha in the films *Umrao Jaan* and *Muqqadar ka Sikander*. The Vamp, on the other hand, had choices. While the Indian heroine's main aim was to win the heart of the hero, vamps were promiscuous women, cabaret dancers whose aim it was to seduce the man and incidentally also excite the man in the audience without overturning the Indian value system. The role of the vamp was to evoke sexual desire; she could wear the most outrageous clothes, do the sexiest dances to songs loaded with sexual innuendo and move freely through seedy nightclubs. Actress Helen played this role with amazing alacrity, ruling the screen between the 1950s and 70s. Clad in fishnet stockings, feather boas and gloves that stretched to her elbows, she often outshone the heroine as she unapologetically danced onto the frame, challenged the male spectator and disappeared as quickly as she came, boldly claiming her body and the space for herself as an entertainer. Her presence, I believe, is the slippage, where we catch glimpses of the real Indian woman, as Helen confesses that her fan mail included letters not only from men but from appreciative women as well. The modern Indian woman is a bit of both; the traditional and the vamp. She has a strong screen presence, wears skimpy clothing, rides a bike, and fights with the villain all with her long mane of hair seductively flying.

Although it may appear that female roles portrayed women as either good or bad, heroine or vamp, some directors did experiment with non-traditional roles but dislocation if any was only temporary. Since woman defines herself with reference to the other and since she derives her selfhood from her role in society, she is, in turn denied independent existence. The film trajectory is fashioned in such a way that the woman, however different, had to eventually submit to male desire, within the patriarchal framework or face disgrace or death. Directors who try to make a difference still sadly remain chained to cultural constructs where in a film like *Biwi No 1*, the hero can expect to lead a normal married life after having an adulterous relationship but Vidya Balan in her character in *The Dirty Picture* has to die in the end because of her lascivious lifestyle. The talented Jaya Bachchan gives up her career both in reel as well as real life, adhering to traditional values of marriage and

motherhood. Sonali Bendre, in the film *Hum Saath Saath Hain* plays the role of a doctor, but except for a single shot in the entire film, Bendre is shown against a backdrop of domesticity instead of the professional. In films *Fashion* and *Corporate,* intelligent, successful women become victims of a corporate struggle rather than being portrayed as women who have fought to carve a niche for themselves in their professions. Sadly, the focus remains on their shortcomings.

Some directors have dared to explore the taboo subjects of sexual infidelity, surrogacy, divorce and live-in relationships from a woman's point of view in films like *Jism, Astitva*, *Salaam Namaste* but these are few and far between. Films like *Chak de India* with innovative realistic and substantial roles showcasing real conflicts faced by ordinary women in a male dominated world and *Black* which portrays a strong female character in a powerful role will, however, continue to be remembered as a Shahrukh Khan or an Amitabh Bachchan film. The films will always be a man's film and the women, always, Charlie's Angels. For the same reason *Revolver Rani* was rejected by mass audiences. A film riding on the success of Kangana Ranaut in *Queen,* it represents the woman as a kind of political Don, a bandit queen. But her forthright and blunt nature as well as overt sexuality comes as too much of a shock for mainstream audiences who reject the film. The film *Queen* on the other hand is a runaway success as the protagonist Rani decides to go off to Europe on her own, taking her planned honeymoon, albeit minus the groom, when she is left almost at the altar as her fiancé calls off the wedding. Innocent and virginal, she has a great time with the really 'nice' people she meets. She saves herself from losing her purse to a bag-snatcher convincing audiences that her innocence and good intentions have kept her safe. The quintessential modern Indian woman continues to be bolder but accepted only when her rebellion is within the accepted shifting paradigm of the Modern *Bharatiya Nari*.

Javed Aktar, in an interview said, 'we take the morality and aspirations of society and personify them. That becomes a character who is idealized'. Like everything post-modern when the world is not quite sure who or what embodies the individual, the identity of the real Indian woman is called upon to constantly reinvent itself. Black and white has made way for shades of grey, for the woman who can be either good or bad as the situation demands. Roles have changed, the focus of the camera has shifted but the woman returns to the traditional role at the close of the film narrative. However in subtle or not-so-subtle ways, the real woman has begun to reshape her identity from behind the safety of the veil, within the inner courtyard, the *purdah.*

Women are not expected to be sexual beings; they are transformed from virginal young girls into sexless creatures as mothers. In spite of stereotypical casting and the staple of writhing bodies draped in rain soaked saris, the Indian woman has evolved into the individual who can straddle the worlds of the professional and the domestic with equal ease. Indian audiences who will never tire of the female form are increasingly being treated to the camera's eye lingering a fraction of a second longer on the male form. From Salman Khan with his penchant for displaying his toned body, Ranbir Kapoor dropping his towel in *Saawariya*, Shah Rukh Khan displaying his six-pack in *Om Shanti Om*, Ranvir Singh in *Ram Leela* to John Abraham in *Dostana*, the three levels of the cinematic gaze; the camera, the character and the spectator are all directed at the man.

Audiences in the West were treated to the sight of Bo Derek leaving the waves in her one-piece swim suit in the film *10* as long ago as 1979. Halle Berry did a Bo Derek in the Bond film *Die Another Day* in 2002. It was not until 2006 that no less than a Bond hero, Daniel Craig rose like an Adonis from the waves in *Casino Royale* to collective gasps of excitement, preparing Indian audiences for the copycat action of John Abraham in the film *Dostana,* signalling the arrival of the quintessential metrosexual male; a man equally comfortable in the salon as he is in the gym, who thinks it's cool to be in touch with his feminine side. In acknowledging the arrival of the global Indian male, the time has also come to notice what the changing *avatar* of the man represents in relation to his female counterpart. As we rewind to the image of John Abraham coming out of the water, we notice the camera lingering on his body, offering it up as a source of pleasure for a group of giggling girls, subjecting him to the controlling, curious gaze; scopophilia at its Narcissistic best.

Theorists like John Berger, Laura Mulvey and Ann Kaplan continue to posit the male in the audience as the possessor of the gaze, overlooking the role of the female spectator. But there can be no doubt that the male form is being offered as a sacrifice on the altar of male vanity endowing the female spectator with the active power of the erotic look, if we survey it in recent films like Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Ram Leela* and Tarun Mansukhani's *Dostana*, in which Ranvir Singh's torso and John Abraham's derriere remain respectively the spectacle of the cinematic gaze. Film makers are increasingly choosing to place the man on display; to glamorise and sexualize him. The obvious exhibitionism and undiluted appreciation of the screen image of the modern man makes it quite obvious that the woman can be the active bearer of the gaze and not merely passive object of the male gaze. The Indian woman is in the process of rewriting the language of the father, she has learnt to appropriate the tools of patriarchy and subversively use it to define herself within the parametres of the inner courtyard.

Indian Culture which gave us the sculptures of *Khajuraho* and the sex manual, *Kamasutra,* boasts a certain level of comfort with the body and the act of sex. As long as sex remained confined to the private world of individuals, there could be problem. Displaced from the private world because of Western Influence and globalisation, the pressure to retain what we think of as Indian culture has increased. The pantheon of hindu gods gives us the concept of *Ardhana-easwara*-half man/half woman, recognising the need for men to be in touch with their feminine side as well as women to be comfortable with masculine elements of their personalities.

The Indian woman may never perhaps achieve complete equality but she has, it appears managed to partially appropriate the tools of patriarchy, usurping it to make her the designer and shaper of her own identity. The modern *Bharatiya Naari* is truly a shape shifter, a flipped Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde; a modern professional or kitty party, Botox treated, aerobics participating woman by day and a traditional home-maker/manager upon her return home. As the family turns a Nelson's eye to her shenanigans, the woman becomes the definer of her own desires and thereby a greater influence on how the male figure is represented in Mainstream Bollywood Cinema. She may continue to remain in the closet, in *purdah*, behind the veil, but she has come to possess a double consciousness as she watches from within the closet, the voyeuristic camera objectify the male form. By rejecting an overt staking of her claim

to equality, her way has become a more powerful means of subversion, instrumental in shaping the sensibilities of the new age woman.

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