

The Accented Cinema: A Narrative Analysis of Bollywood film Water

Zaid Bin Inam*
Mudassir Mukhtar**

Abstract

The cinema act as a mass medium that project intangible reality related to the socio-cultural setting of an era with reference to gender portrayal that may envelope the viewers perception. This article focusses on the representation of gender disparity in the film Water (2005) directed by Deepa Mehta. The study seeks to identify the discrepancies in terms of gender dichotomous role in the film contextually situated before the partition of Indo-Pak subcontinent. By examining the film as case study, the qualitative research design is employed to critically evaluate the underlying thematic frameworks like male dominance, child marriages, plight of widows and symbolic re-presentation of women in accented cinema. The narrative analysis method is adopted to understand the thematic construction of gender discriminatory narrative based on socio-cultural and economic factors of that era. The findings suggest the notion of privileged gender disparity and unquestioned traditions under the umbrella of cultural beliefs that were downplaying the role of women. Moreover, the conventional portrayal of the widow as 'devoid of substantial agency' makes them powerless to voice out their grievances. The film is a critic to the time-honored facet of the culture, so that the deplorable condition of the underprivileged class can be highlighted.

Keywords: Bollywood, Cinema, Narrative, Symbolic re-presentation.

* Lecturer, Media and Communication Studies Department, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. Email: zaidbin.inam@numl.edu.pk.

** Associate Professor, Media and Communication Studies Department, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

Introduction

The world of cinema has inculcated the framework under which the audience idealizes the social environment around them. The rise of Indian cinema as cultural production in the 20th century for domestic and foreign audiences strategically place the Indian cinema as significant dimension at an international arena (Hafeez, 2016). This aspect contributes to a significant factor of soft power for India. The social realism and art films depict the nature of societal perception regarding the gender roles. The lead characters in the film transverse the audience into their roles through their performance on the screen. In the formative years of Indian cinema, the prominent figures like Dadashed Phalke, Jamshedi Framji Madan, Diren Ganguly and others made films based on their distinct mythological and social themes. The Indian cinema started with the genre of mythological films like Raja Harishchandra with static and episodic structure (Tapia, 2021).

This study revolves around the narrative analysis of accented cinema (Naficy, 2001) in which films are made by the diasporic people with respect to their own consciousness, however, the host societies sometimes interpret the notion of 're-presentation' of characters by the diasporic people as an instance of "outward gaze" (Gordon, 2002) that re-impose and re-contextualize the distinctive cultures and traditions. The Film *Water* is based on the novel written by Bapsi Sidhwa published in 2006. The characters of protagonist in the films are visually manifested by Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair redefine their boundaries because of discriminatory notion of female gender roles (Moodley, 2003). Similarly, the postcolonial discourse of scholar's such as Homi Bhabha often instrumentalize the colonizer with stereotypical identities that secured the power of colonizers (Bhabha, 1994).

The film revolves around the life of widows. According to the Hindu ethics, the widow has three option to lead their life and one of them is to re-marry, however, this aspect as represented in the film, is not considered a socially accepted practice. The portrayal of emancipation of women from socio-cultural constraints to courageous protagonists became observable in twentieth century and these films also received appreciation from the audience (Mukherjee, 2008).

Every film has an element of symbols through which the unfolding of the script takes it definite shape. However, the shooting of the film *Water* was postponed by portraying its director as "outsiders" owing to the allegedly unfavorable depiction of Varanasi and widowhood. The construction of binary identities places the "self" against the threatening

others as outsiders. The Orientalist image of the director was depicted for having cultural roots outside of India guided by the projection of western stereotypes regarding India. This issue also highlighted the implications of “Hindu nationalism” which didn’t able to get significant manifestation at that time because of the coalition politics (Mason, 2002).

Films can be both context and time-specific in terms of mechanical reproduction of aesthetic nature but their underlying meaning carry ideological connotation. In the contemporary world, the media is a source of shaping the visual culture by transcending the time and space. The images have the potential to construct and re-construct the ideology projected by the elites. Herbert Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*, argued that the one-dimensional flow of information can create a false thinking in the general population (Marcuse, 1964).

The portrayal of gender disparity prevailed in the Indian cinematic landscape, however, there are films like *Neerja* (2016) directed by Ram Madhvani that questioned the traditional portrayal of women. It is a film based on real story of air hostess Neerja Bhanot. The story revolves around a woman who sacrificed her life while saving the people amid the hijacking of the plane. In this film, the lead character is shown as an independent and career-oriented woman. The portrayal of Neerja is not synonymous with the traditional depiction received by male protagonists who is characterized as the ‘savior’ in the films. The stereotyping can also be attributed to the accumulated representation of a specific role in the media like newspaper, TV, radio etc. The culture is an on-going process that acquired and assimilates the aspects of the time in order to develop a definite culture in real time. The celluloid is the way of projecting the collection of concepts to the larger audience. Due to the evolving pattern of storytelling and aesthetics, the independent directors (Aditiya, 2024) are making the films to highlight the cultural patterns among the heterogeneous segments of the society. In the traditional patriarchal society, the life of the women and its future is being tied with the male character. The male character act as a savior, in contrast to the prevalent underestimated value of women (Lagamba, 2012).

The central question of the paper is to understand the gender portrayal in the accented cinema. The narrative analysis, as qualitative research method, is employed to understand the underlying themes in the film. Moreover, both the researchers independently identified the themes after watching the film. The themes were then compared and any differences in the themes were resolved in the light of study’s conceptual framework.

The film *Water* is selected because it is based on pre-partition ambiance of rituals and practices that prevailed in the Indo-Pak sub-

continent. The film revolves around the portrayal of women and their grievances. It represents how the woman used to spend their lives after the death of their husband and the culturally-mediated exploitation of widows. This study will take into account the narrative analysis of themes in the film *Water* directed by Deepa Mehta.

Literature review

French Feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir argues that one is not born woman rather one is made (de Beauvoir, 1956). Dichotomous representation of male and female have transformed the expectations of the roles that are being performed by the respective genders. The film, as a mass medium, continues to shape the narrative of gender portrayal based on intersectionality catalyzed by race, socio-economic and political aspects that have an influence on cultural norms (Sachar, 2024).

Laura Mulvey's influential article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" employs the psychoanalysis approach and suggests that cinematic pleasure is the affirmation of the heterosexual fantasy of man as active, desiring subject and woman as passive, desired object (Mulvey, 1975). From that perspective, one can assume that the audience derives their experience from the roles that are being performed on the basis of written script. That representation is not the actual manifestation of their lives. The perception of the result is one-dimensional as the males are expected to gain the dominate position in order to subjugate the female as an object. The theoretical framework in media studies such as Uses and Gratification Theory (Baran & Davis, 2011) describe how the audiences are programmed to consume the media. The media act as tool of satisfaction for the audience which also includes entertainment. But the audience needs to be cognitively aware about the bounty of this one flow of information. Linguistic John Austin argued that languages can be divided into: Constative and Performative. Constative language is merely descriptive, and performative language is expression that changes the status of the subject (Austin, 1975). One can draw the analogy with the director of the film. A director of the film act as a performative part of the film in which he or she can decide the power relations based on negotiation and compromise. Annette Kuhn (1994) points out that a psychoanalytically informed analysis combines both text and context since it related what is "in the text" (the figure on the screen) to the operations of cinema itself (the apparatus) and where that places the viewer (Kuhn, 1994).

The role of media in the contemporary times is underscored by the production and maintenance of ideology supportive of elites through the

exercise of political and economic tool. Film scholar and author argued that “Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects with rarely any sense of agency being imparted to them” (Chatterji, 1998). In this backdrop, the medium of film projects the subjective identity of a character that defies the agency to gender. However, some film projects the character of female in liberal feminist aspect such as in film *Bol*. The discourse analysis of the films illustrates the self-identity of female character that challenges the patriarchal framework in society. The female character used the language which shows the liberal dimension in their respective identities and roles (Shahzadi, 2015). The social construction of gender bear significant implications, especially for female, to exercise their independent role in the contemporary societal milieu. Media also project gender relatively in different manner owing to their socioeconomic status and cultural factors. The film *Aandhi* exemplify the non-conformist construction of traditional role of women by Gulzar, famous Indian poet and song lyricist. The female protagonist in the film is projected as politician, a space traditionally occupied by male, and its associated dilemmas (Chamola, 2019). Each phase of Indian cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal frame-work of the Indian society.

In to analyze the underlying meaning of any visual, one can refer to the scheme of De Saussure and Roland Barthe. De Saussure’s perspective about the signifier and signified further elaborated by Roland Barthe in which myth is constructed as “second- order thinking” (R & Thamayanthi, 2022). There is a material and ideational-oriented meaning reality, and the elements in the scripts can be operationalized using these tools. The social reality, as constructed by media, is subject to change. The-media portrayal of minorities i.e., Asia Americans in the US films illustrate both the “stereotype-resisting” and “stereotype-confirming” representations (Besana, Katsiaficas, & Loyd, 2020). Walter Benjamin in his seminal work titled “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” states the representation of environment through mechanical equipment by man as characteristic of a film (Benjamin, 1969). Subsequently, the film *Water* re-present the socio-cultural practices that symbolizes the social environment of that time in which the gender specific expectations dialectically situate the female in less-privileged position.

Themes

National hero as a symbolic meaning; Male dominancy

The personality of protagonist in a film, either male or female, can

often represent as a savior during the time of hardships. In the film *Dhanak* (2015), the symbolic meaning of Shah Rukh Khan was very significant, as it was representing the invocation by the respective personification. Shah Rukh Khan was not shown in the film but his name was used as a representation of savior. In the film *Water* the projected persona of Mahatma Gandhi was also represented as a source of liberation from the entanglement of oppression and colonialism. When the Gandhi freed from the imprisonment, the people gathered at the railway station to pay reverence to him. At the same time the child star of the film, *Chuhiya*, were also rescued by the lead male character, *Narayan*, at the railway station. The argument regarding the coincidence of Gandhi's narrative of liberation and people were getting out from the envelope of colonialism and exploitation can be inferred from the storyline.

Child Marriages: Renunciation

This film highlighted the factor of child marriages and how they ultimately became the victim of traditions and prevalent norms. The practice of child marriage started after 600 AD and this practice became 'degenerated' during the British period (Bhagat, 2016). The film depicts that the female character got married in an early age during the start of the film, however, she (*Chuhiya*), didn't know when she got married. According to the cultural tradition of that region, when the husband died, the widow is not allowed to wear the colorful and embellished dresses. Subsequently, the *Chuhiya's* head was shaved and she used to wear the white saree as a symbol of widow and renunciation from the worldly affairs. The narrative analysis of the films from a gender-focused point of view illustrate that the seed of (in)ability to select the potential life partner garnered at the very young age. Resultantly, the encapsulation of the dishonored folk (especially widows) will ultimately translate into the 'lack of independency' and docile profiling of the females.

Narayana: Epithet

The semiotics of the character names signifies the relationship with the screenplay which in turn supplement the narrative. The understanding of denotative and connotative aspect (Smith, 2017) of character's name in the film explicate the contextual framework under which the character navigate along the path of respective time and space for variable interpretations. The cinematic understating of onomastica, a field of study of proper names, would augment the situational understanding of character's name, historical connotation and personality in the film. The

name Narayana, central figure in Hinduism (Dokras, 2021), of the lead male character is related to the re-presentation of his role in the film.

To question the plight of widow

The cinematic language and discursive framework in the film intends to re-construct an image in the viewer's mind that the upholding traditions and norms favor the male domain but the plight of the widow is unquestionable and they are prone to become a victim after their husband's death. The widows in the asharam used to live a decolorized life. According to the film, the widows cannot eat the fried food, attend any functions and to express their wish to remarry with other person. Their life is devoid of any substantial agency to change their own fate. Moreover, the widows are not allowed to attend the wedding function.

Educational disparity

‘Humein parhna nahein ata’, said by Kalyani (female character).

The film tries to depict the element of educational polarity in terms of their assessment on the scale of gender. The framework of “monopolization” to acquire knowledge was not just rooted in the respective societies rather it is a vested tool to accomplish the goal of hegemony by transforming the active mind into passive reception. Women in these societies are subject to domestic work and nurturing of the child. Radical feminist in the education sector argue that there is a male monopolization of knowledge and culture (Shukla & Mishra, 2020). By connecting the theoretical underpinning with the story, the film portrays the social reality as argued by the radical feminists.

Queer Perspective

The cultural manufacturing of the role remains in constant flux due to different elements like education, economy, and social dynamics. Michael Warner (1993) argued that queer defines itself against regimes of the normal rather than heterosexuality (Warner, 1993). But there are some segments in the society that are portrayed as having no societal value rather their domain is the abyss of darkness. In Bollywood, the representation of queer perspective remained minimal at the expanse of heteronormativity, however, the Indian cinema produced films such as Chandigarh Kare Ashiqui, Badhai do etc., that portrayed the life of queer in terms of their hardships and complexity of their relationships (Bala & Gupta, 2024). It is asserted that the film highlights the social construction of eunuch in a

respective socio-cultural milieu that are subservient to elites.

Conclusion

This research qualitatively analyzes the narrative construction in the accented cinema. The film is an adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa's novel and directed by Deepa Mehta. The film portrays the female gender that lacks both the agency and power that resultantly derived from socio-cultural perspective of that era. The film situated the social reality in the pre-independence time. The narrative analysis illustrates the themes such as child marriages, male dominance, queer perspective, educational disparity and plight of widows. The re-presentation of gender role in the film situate the female, especially widow, with less ability to exist as independent agency. Additional research is needed to analyze the narrative construction of films that portray the diverse and positive re-presentation of gender. It is important for the film-makers to project the gender roles which defy the traditionally defined parameters that asymmetrically project dichotomous roles. In the contemporary media landscape, more scholarly work is required in the field of accented cinema.

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