Bollywood, Popular Visual Media, and Sexism in India: A Critical Glance Back

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Abstract
Sexism is a sociocultural and psychological construct existing since ages. The popular media, as a mode of influencing public mindset and opinion, is also inflicted by it. The current discussion centers around the gender role stereotyping and sexism portrayed in the mainstream Indian movies, television, and advertisements and its evolution over the years. We also highlight the possible reasons behind the continued sexism in the media, and the bidirectional influence of popular media on the society and vice versa. We conclude that the portrayal is changing with increased awareness despite the challenges present, and a continuous attempt at promoting gender equality at all levels will help shape the sociocultural beliefs and public perceptions in the long run.

Keywords
Bollywood, media, Indian television, sexism, gender role, India

Preamble
Sexism is the prejudice, stereotype, or discrimination, on the basis of sex, typically against women.1 It is seen to exist in various socio-occupational fields all over the world, including the media. The media are often seen to underrepresent and misrepresent women as well as stereotype gender roles across the globe.2 This article focuses on the Indian scenario involving portrayal of women in the popular visual media that are mainstream movies, advertisements, and television series, and its evolution over the years.

Mainstream Indian Movies
Indian movies come under either a large ambit of Bollywood, the Hindi-language cinema fraternity, or regional industries, like those of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Bengal, Assam, and so on. Though the four Southern states produce more movies in a year together, Bollywood represents Indian cinema in the international market.3 Considering the global impact of the stereotyping shown in the Hindi movies, we shall limit the discussion of sexism only in context of Bollywood.

Since the 1950s, movies made in this industry have undergone several conceptual and technical changes. Talking about the female representation, there were fewer women working in the industry as directors, actors, producers, scriptwriters, and so on, to start with. The general behind-the-scene male dominance was reflected on the screen as well. Gradually, female representation increased. But interestingly, the inherent sexism did not go away.4 For example, in the older movies, female leads or characters were usually the mother or romantic interest or wife of the male leads, with the objective of supporting them in their life endeavors.3 The women were there to add “beautiful reliefs” in between the real-life struggles and difficulties faced by the heroes. The ones defying general societal norms were either mistresses, vamps, club-dancers, women who harbored habits like smoking or drinking, or women who expressed sexuality and sexual interest. The costumes were also designed to depict the same, with “good” women wearing more of traditional clothes and “not-so-good” women being scantily clothed.
From this kind of overt sexism in the early days, the movies evolved over time, and sexism as well as misogyny became implicit. Despite attempts to create roles for women working in different careers like knife-thrower (Jaya Bachchan in Zanjeer) and tanga-driver (Hema Malini in Sholay), the roles never transcended beyond the gender archetypes of the Indian society. They ended up being just fancy add-ons to the main male lead.4 Even movies like Mother India did not talk about the lady’s choice to become the savior or fighter. Her taking that path was contingent on her family, husband, and children, to fulfil their needs. The typical characterization of “good women” in Hindi cinema can be summed up as being domestic, virtuous, unambitious, prioritizing family over self, submissive, religious or god-fearing, chaste, and essentially additional and dispensable. Another type of characterization is objectification. This is done in two ways. The first is the overt way, that is, making the women wear skimpy clothes, songs or visuals focusing on the bare body parts, sensuous framing (e.g., rain scenes like the controversial Ram Teri Ganga Maili song), and so on. The second and the more subtle way is the character framing such as like a pawn for the male lead’s advancement or progress. An example can be Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s Naram Garam where the female lead was continuously used as a marital bait for Amol Palekar’s job security and progress. This was one of the so-called feel-good, light-hearted movies as was Mukherjee’s genre. However, none of them, along with the mainstream movies like Sholay or Mughal-e-Azam, ever defied the gender stereotypes.

The third kind of character is that of the “unacceptable and villainous” women. This includes, in addition to the ones mentioned before, women interacting with multiple men, having relationships with men before or outside of marriage, etc. The same, when shown in context of men, has not been considered an offence. Male adultery or polygamy or flings in the films were usually accepted at the end with a tearful reconciliation with the wife, who was supposed to bear with the perpetrator’s express being influenced by the Hindi movies.5,6 Sexuality, Stalking, Sexual Offences

Sexuality of women has been another taboo in Indian cinema, and certain actors/actresses have permanently been associated with sexual explicitness, and have only been seen in that light. They hardly landed any different role because of the character framing and objectification by viewers and directors alike. Movies like Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Darr, Anjaam, Tere Naam, Wanted, among many, normalized stalking, sexual harassment, and assault so much so that love became synonymous with such behaviors among the youth. Either the women in these movies finally fell in love with the perpetrator, or the perpetrator died at the end almost becoming a martyr in love. Characters, worthy of being imprisoned and punished, were made into enigmas of love. The objectification, humiliation, and disrespect of women rose to another height. Multiple sexual crimes have been reported countrywide where the perpetrators expressed being influenced by the Hindi movies.5,6

Sexism in Movies in Recent Times

In the last two decades, there has been a change in the overt portrayal as we were discussing earlier. Gender role stereotypes
have changed their presentation. One example is the movie Jab We Met which boasted of a differently shown female lead. Though the character of Geet was commendable from many aspects, the stereotyping cannot be missed. She was made into a happy-going, imaginative, impulsive girl at the cost of a sense of responsibility or rationality. Then came the more recent Kabir Singh with a large-scale normalization of intimate partner violence, abuse, and misogyny in the name of love. Others include the Housefull series, Dabangg, Student of the Year series, and so on. There are several directors trying to bring out a real depiction of women in movies as in life. But these attempts are often offset by the films still promoting gender role stereotypes in various ways. Gender role bias for women goes hand-in-hand with that for men. Vulnerability, helplessness, delicacy, sacrifice, kindness, and generosity are mostly believed as feminine qualities, whereas men are to protect, fight, argue, assert, and progress financially and occupationally. In a movie named I Hate Luv Stories, the mother’s character of Imran Khan (the male lead) was heard saying that she wanted a son and was given a daughter instead, since Khan’s character was crying over phone. Just a small dialogue in a movie thus can reflect gender role bias and impact public perceptions. Films like Fashion, Corporate, though known as women-centric, ended up conforming to the social gender bias and gender archetyping. The lead female in Fashion suddenly giving up ambition to become a mother and becoming conscientious of morality and rights and wrongs only after giving in to cocaine and racism (abrupt sexual interaction with a black fellow was what brought about the psychological awakening in the lady), the one in Corporate setting an example of poor professional decision-making capacity (sacrifice for love, again) despite being a hardcore professional, were nothing but characters formed on the basis of social stereotypes. Despite a definite effort to change the depiction of women in the Indian cinema in last one or two decades, the mainstream movies, thus, have ended up showing women as either being the goddess-type, or the impulsive-irrational-irresponsible-type, or the amoral-type. The general portrayal of women as balanced characters, at least devoid of such dramatic dichotomous categorization, still has a long way to go.

Role of Objectifying Songs

The icing on the cake is the new-age popularity of item songs and raps commodifying women, their body parts, and value. Item or cabaret songs of older movies showed women in revealing clothes and unacceptable demeanor. With the visual objectification, went the lyrics of the songs like Fevicol, Sheela, Munni, Jalebi Bai, Choli Ke Peeche, Mujhko Ranaji Maaf, and many more. Women were made into mere objects of “desire and lust,” devoid of dignity. Then came the rap culture that grew so popular as to be played everywhere from children’s parties to nightclubs. Continued promotion of stalking (Aaja Meri Gaadi Mein Baith Jao), and devaluation of women (Kudi Mainu Kehndi, Blue Eyes, Sunny Sunny), along with the humiliating videos, crept their way up to the movies and music to this extent that it is hard to find a mainstream movie nowadays which does not have a similar soundtrack. While some may argue that these are just lyrics based on individual preferences, we need to be aware of the deep-seated influence this popular entertainment has on all of us, especially the children and adolescents.

Pathbreakers in the Course

There are movies, as we mentioned earlier, that have tried for many years to break the gender role stereotype. Mirch Masala, Arth, Fire, Water, Daman, Queen, Kahaani, Chandni Bar, Ijaazat, That Girl in Yellow Boots, Masaan, Margarita with a Straw, 15 Park Avenue, Astitva, My Brother...Nikhil, Unfreedom, Lajja, and Lust Stories are to name a few. Women were depicted with human needs in most of these movies, with both virtues and vices. They dealt with women’s perspectives on speaking against ongoing neglects, abuses, humiliation, and dignity despite the profession chosen (barmaid, prostitute, masseuse, homemaker, or anything), independence in living and decision-making, and ambitions. They also showed issues like sociopolitical exploitation of widows in Varanasi, same-sex love, societal intolerance of women breaking stereotypes, and so on. These movies have, however, been categorized traditionally as art films or parallel movies that do not earn enough revenue at the box office. Fortunately, this boundary has blurred in the recent times, though not completely abolished. A number of such films were sociopolitical disasters, whereas movies like Sholay, Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, etc. kept attracting viewers for many years.

Women Empowerment—Patriarchy Reinforcement Paradox

Here, it will be pertinent to discuss the paradox of women empowerment and reinforcement of patriarchy in Hindi cinema. Movies like Mother India, Fashion, Corporate, Veere Di Wedding, and so on fall under this type which tried to empower women but from under the ambit of patriarchy. Men of different dispositions or circumstances empowering women without really a concept of self-identification and autonomy is visible in these movies. In relatively newer films, depiction of liberated women as indulging in traditional male habits of smoking, drinking, sexual advancement, masturbation, though arguably a progressive step, equates gender independence with such things which, in the core, have very weak link with gender equality, if at all. Women have often ended up surrounding their lives and life decisions based on the marital prospect. Some female characters are shown possessing less of intellect, and more of rebelliousness. Paradoxically, such reflections are rooted deep in the patriarchial system and values. Defiance of classically feminine qualities propagated by patriarchy simply reinforces
patriarchy, rather than challenging it. Another problem with such films is that they portray gender equality as a complete antithesis to the social belief. It gives rise to debates, and equation of equality with unacceptable behaviors (many behaviors like promiscuity and substance use are theoretically harmful for both sexes). The entire idea of feminism is brought down to another extremist belief with subsequent devaluation of gender equality.9

Other Popular Visual Media

Advertisements

Popular visual media include advertisements, television shows, plays, and so on. We will discuss briefly about the gender role stereotyping observed in mainstream television shows and advertisements. Advertisements in the older time like 1960s and 1970s, as movies, used to show the gender role bias conspicuously. Training ladies with sewing machine to be the ideal housewives, husband’s happiness being one’s happiness in a health drink advertisement, banking ads promoting saving for daughters’ marriage, and staying beautiful as one of the most desirable things for women are some of the examples. However, the objectification did not stop with advancing time. Several advertisements, like those of deodorants, jeans, face cream, shampoo, pressure cooker, jewelry, detergent, and whiskey have been abominably upholding the misogyny. Detergent, dishwasher, cookware, cooking condiment, and ingredient (e.g., cooking spices) ads have hardly shown men doing the chores. Banking ads have mostly depicted savings and family’s future planning as the male’s responsibility. Fairness products, along with feeding the Indian societal keenness for whiter skin, also discriminate between men and women for differential fairness requirements. A car advertisement showed a cartoon of three gagged women with accentuated body parts to explain the space in it. There is no single winner among these, since all of them conformed to overlapping dimensions of sexism and continued endorsing it even now.

Television Shows

Television shows in India have followed a slightly different trajectory by starting with showing strong and relevant female characters to producing almost no mainstream prime time show devoid of sexism. Shows like Rajani, Shanti, and Udaan had strong and temporally contextual female leads. Then came the era of “K shows, single-handedly bringing down all the efforts to promote gender equality. They reeked of age-old superstitions, social stagnation, misogyny, and sexism. As these received immense viewership, most of the other shows on those television channels simply reproduced the formula, and the entire television media became an epitome of gender role bias. Shows like Balika Vadhu had apparently tried to question the child marriage custom, but only took a few episodes to normalize this social curse, along with overt sexist beliefs and customs. Another show called Bhabi Ji Ghar Par Hai! was aired as an apparently light-hearted one, and sexism was chosen as the tool to enhance its fun quotient. The entire mainstream television has been devoted in promoting gender role bias in the last two to three decades. Indian Matchmaking is a recent show on a digital platform with similar notions. There are other attempts like Bombay Begums which, despite attempting to be women-centric, have fallen into the “women empowerment-patriarchy reinforcement paradox” mentioned before. Such examples are plenty and the “norm” in most of regional language TV soaps. However, there are some welcome changes happening in last few years. Platforms are coming up with shows, web series, and stand-up comedies which are striving toward removing gender role stereotypes.

Movies and Popular Visual Media, and the Society: The Mutual Influence

The influence of movies, advertisements, and television shows on the mindsets of people is found considerably huge. Movies can have significant effect on gender stereotyping as found by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro.10 There are various theories on how the popular media can affect the emotion, behavior, and cognition at large. There are theories of minimal effects, theory of a strong effect, cultivation theory, and so on.11,12 Gender role stereotypes and sexism shown in the popular visual media may impact public opinion formation and beliefs and attitude wherein imitation, idolization, normalization, and sensitization to gender inequality play a role. The attempt at the real-life application of the shown attributes by the youth and older adults is a behavioral manifestation of the same. It is also worth of exploring why sexism exists in the media. There are multiple theories posited by Sowmya Nandakumar.3 The first theory is the sociocultural framework of attitude, values, and beliefs impacting the directors’ portrayal and viewers’ responses. It is proposed that the creators (directors, producers) belong to the sociocultural framework with the specific notion on gender role stereotypes which get reflected in the characters they form. Viewers also seem to identify more with a character conforming to their belief systems. Thus, complying with the existing gender prejudices attracts more viewers and thus becomes commercially successful. Any inconsistency in the inherent attitude, value, and belief system shown in the media tends to give rise to dissatisfaction, resulting in non-viability of the movie or show or advertisement in the financial and social domains. Thus, it is the easier way out adopted by many. The next theory is that of power structure. The sociopolitical power structure is threatened by differently painted characters. This might give rise to unrest, ban, and violence, as observed with movies like Fire, and Water; where the director had to be offered protection against conformist vandalism. The third theory is of cognitive dissonance. This is closely related to the
first theory with a focus on the psychological construct. Conflicting beliefs give rise to cognitive dissonance, and thus distress in an individual. An individual may change his/her belief system, add new beliefs to rationalize one belief and devalue the other, or choose to be selectively exposed to one kind of information, to reduce dissonance. The first option is the most difficult, and hence not adopted by the most.

It is imperative to state that popular movies/songs/advertisements have been an integral part of our lives at all stages. Besides humming to a known tune, heated debates about plots and critical reviews about performance, gradually yet deeply have also influenced how we think (stereotypes), what we feel (prejudice), and how we act (discrimination). Movies or shows or advertisements creating cognitive dissonance will, thus, not be acceptable on a larger scale. This is true for the viewers as well as the creators. Female underrepresentation, male gaze, dichotomous characterization of heroines, and vamps are all manifestations of these sociocultural and cognitive obstacles. Item songs or raps objectifying women gaining incredible viewership and audience on social media, streaming platforms, and other establishments (restaurants, pubs, parties) show the ease with which popular belief takes over rationality and judgment. Condemnation of such movies, shows, songs, and advertisements is restricted to a single group of people, often categorized as activists, feminists, or likewise. The bidirectional influence of social systems and popular media, thus, ends up forming a vicious cycle.

Way Forward

Difficulties in promoting and making a sensible movie, show, song, or advertisement are multifold. There are, however, glimpses of hope. Several directors, producers, and songwriters continue to create in a gender-neutral way, and promote gender equality, even in the face of all challenges. This article points out several gender-insensitive lacunae that exist but do not aim to criticize the years of dedication, hard work, and labor put in at all levels for the making of movies/advertisements. Attitudes and approaches are changing, both from directors and crew as well as the public. A trend of sensible real-life media has been observed in the recent years. The number of movies/shows/advertisements defying sexism and educating about gender equality has increased. Many well-known artists have come forward calling out on the age-old misogynist depictions. Awareness of own rights has risen among women. Voicing one’s opinions has been easier with the advent of social media. The lack of validation from the peer on not conforming to sociocultural norms has reduced to a considerable extent. The occupational underrepresentation of women has also come down. All these have led to a strengthening of expression of desires and rights in women. Though the vicious cycle of sociocultural belief system and media depiction of gender biases is not easy to break, it is important to acknowledge the baby steps toward that goal. To conclude, the only way to abolish sexism from being portrayed on the popular media is to abolish it from the common mindsets, where the popular visual media play a crucial role. Organizations promoting sexual health and gender equality (the Indian Psychiatric Society, or any other administrative body or nongovernment organizations) can participate by issuing position statements as frameworks to follow. Despite initial risks of commercial failure and sociocultural resistance, film and visual media industries (given their popularity) should actively collaborate with relevant organizations to bring about change which is sustainable in the long run.

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