

## **FROM THE CHRYSALIS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE HINDI CINEMA**

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Movie being a strong medium for communicating ideas to a large group at a time, it may be noted that the issues confronted by women can be best depicted before the public through cinema. With the emergence of 'The New Indian Wave' which dates back to the 1960s a number of social issues were taken up as the subject for cinema. Amongst this was the position of women in the Indian society. Although several attempts have been made to bring out the problems faced by women in our society, it must be admitted that there has not been much of a difference in their condition down the years. A strong example for this would be the portrayal of women in the popular cinema. The popular cinema is invariably watched by all the sections of the society who to some extent try to imbibe a portion of it to their lives. Here I have attempted to analyze the portrayal of women in three most popular movies from the year 1990 to 2000, which is believed to be one of the best periods of the Hindi cinema. The movies are *Astitva* (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), and *Anjaam* (1994).

The movie *Astitva* picturises the life of Aditi (Tabu) who tries to find a separate identity outside her marriage. She leads the life of a loaner in spite of being married. The busy life of her husband, Shrikant Pandit (Sachin Khedekar) who is an imminent star at a firm has very little time for his wife and their married life. Shrikant is represented as a male chauvinist who finds it difficult to accept his wife as an individual and expects her to sit at home and do nothing but look after the house and give birth to his children. Aditi's request to let her work is rebuffed and considered as an insult for his family. Through Shrikant we get to see the arrogance and the under-representation of women in any activity that she wants to confront. Further in the movie we find Aditi being permitted to learn music but he makes sure that she learns it only for the sake of pleasure and does not take it up as a profession. It is with the music teacher Malhar Kamat (Mohnish Bahl) that Aditi develops an extra marital affair and becomes pregnant. But when she decides to confess about her affair to her husband he does not let her complete her story and celebrates the news of his imminent fatherhood. In fact there is very little heed for the wife's emotion in a patriarchal society where man is on the lead role. She feels suffocated and strained in wedlock where she has no identity for herself. This movie lays bare the fact that nowhere is the heroine given the opportunity to speak her heart out to her husband. When he comes to know of it twenty five years later he punishes her by making her confess of her extramarital affair before her son Aniket (Sunil Barve) and their family friends Dr. Ravi Bapat (Ravindra Mankani) and Meghna (Smita Jaykar). Meghna, Aditi's friend, a victim of spousal abuse is portrayed as a bold character that stands up against the injustice and pain inflicted on women. She divorces her husband and marries Dr. Ravi who is capable of understanding her as a separate individual. The movie ends with Aditi walking out of Shekar's and Aniket's life with Revati (Namrata Shirodkar) who breaks her engagement with Aniket. Aditi unleashes herself of all ties. She is finally capable of thinking for herself rather than in terms of her husband. This scene is very symbolic as it presents before us a new face of the Indian woman who is capable of surviving without the support of a family or under the shelter of her husband as it had come to be known until date. The role of a woman as a mere spectator and a mute member in the family reduces her life into mere existence as the title of the movie '*Astitva*' suggests.

The portrayal of women in Indian cinema clearly sketches the place occupied by them in a Patriarchal society. Women are judged based on the male gaze and not according to the female spectator who is often considered as passive spectators. The movie *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* is a

romantic comedy where we find the slow transformation of the tom boy heroine Anjali Sharma (Kajol) into a well groomed woman as we see her towards the later part of the movie. The social construct that a woman ought to be feminine is being emphasized here through the movie. Anjali Sharma who is initially seen in a boy's attire suppresses her femininity and likes to be in the company of boys. Rahul Khanna (Shahrukh Khan) one of the most popular boys in college is her best friend and prefers her for her frank and out spoken nature. But it is later when the Principal's daughter Tina (Rani Mukherjee) enrolls herself at the college that Anjali starts to realize the need to transform herself to impress Rahul with whom she is secretly in love. Tina being the antithesis of Anjali is feminine, seductive not very bold and is immediately attracted by Rahul. The high heel shoes and the figure revealing dresses of Tina are attempts to represent women as objects of erotic spectacle. The representation of women as sex objects gives men voyeuristic satisfaction and women exhibitionistic pleasure. Female spectators on the other hand as Laura Mulvey adds in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* are always repressed and objectified by the patriarchal culture in order to curtail the threat of castration and thereby trying to maintain the code set by the dominant culture. Another notable fact in the portrayal of the Indian women in the movie is the close-up shots of their body parts which is fetishism. Towards the beginning of the movie the close-up shots of Anjali and Rahul are shown in order to give an introduction to the characters whereas when Tina makes her entry the camera fetishistically isolates fragments of her body like her hair, eyes etc which highlights that unlike the hero, she is valued above all for her beauty and sexual desirability. The movie therefore tries to satisfy the interests of the male spectators which form the controlling gaze in cinema.

The female characters for the most part are painted from the perspective of the dominant culture which is incomplete, false and misogynistic. The feminists have aimed at improving the representation of women in cinema. And as a result a number of movies have been directed by female directors giving an authentic representation of the inner self of women. The struggle of a woman against the pain and hardship inflicted upon her by a crazy lover is the gist of the movie *Anjaam*. The heroine Shivani Chopra (played by Madhuri Dixit) is represented as a strong character that has to pay much in her life for her smartness. She quits her job and confines her life to her husband and family which is the norm laid down for women by patriarchy. As mentioned by Mulvey here too the portrayal of Shivani in danger is a sight that appeals to the male audience who secretly enjoy the sight of seeing women in distress as this ensures their superiority over the opposite sex. In the movie when Shivani is jailed for a crime she is not guilty the ego of the male spectator is satisfied as the weak picture of Shivani evokes in him a strange sense of contentment. Every other situation of a damsel in distress reassures the male ego and gives him sadistic pleasure whereas the assault and suffering provides the female audience masochistic pleasure. The scene where Shivani is brought to jail and is being abused verbally as well as physically by the jailer (Kalpana Iyer) who is found smoking is an example of castration anxiety. Here the jail warden is masculinized with the image of the cigarette and her oppressive attitude towards Shivani. Women pose a problem for the male who looks at her. Since she lacks a penis she evokes the threat of castration. This castration anxiety in films is mastered in two ways: first, through voyeurism, investigating the woman and revealing her guilt (i.e. her castration), and then either punishing or saving her; second, by disavowing castration through fetishism, i.e. endowing the woman's body with extreme aesthetic perfection, which diverts attention from her missing penis and makes her reassuring rather than dangerous. The later part of the movie shows how Shivani, after undergoing a plethora of hardship finally stands up against it and becomes successful but at the cost of her own life. The black dress worn by her is symbolic of her transformation into Goddess Kali who is considered as the mother of the universe according to the Hindu mythology and whose earliest incarnation was the figure of annihilation. Shivani defeats the man who has destroyed her life with the power of her feminine energy and in the attempt to protect herself she sacrifices her life. Her transformation to Kali can be compared to the femme castratrice; an all powerful, all destructive figure, who arouses a fear of castration and death while simultaneously invoking a masochistic

desire for death, pleasure and oblivion in men. It's the male body and not the female body that bears the burden of castration. The heroines of rape-revenge belongs in this category. Here, however we may see that Shivani has been raped of her family, her child and the hope to live.

Thus from the analysis of the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema, it may be concluded that the position enjoyed by women has had very little change over the years. Woman in her self exploration is trying to re-write the dominant codes that hinder her development and evolution, the struggle for which still continues.

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