

A BROAD LOOK AT THE SKEWED AND FLAWED DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA FROM INCEPTION TO THE PRESENT DAY

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ABSTRACT

Indian Cinema is an industry that has grown exponentially and has viewership worldwide. However, gender bias has flourished in this space and women have been given the short end of the stick in real-time and in their representation and depictions. It is time to introspect on this skewed scale that somehow manages to give a raw deal to women. In this day and age, should it not be based on the worthiness of effort and enterprise instead of a subconscious adherence to the ways of the past? Gender bias in filmhood sees the male dominate the working of the industry across the spectrum of authorship, direction, and acting. Even representations of women are from the male perspective and bordering on plasticity. Gender inequality is not a battle that can be won in a day. It takes more than thinking, acknowledgment, and reparation of wrong to get to a place where both genders are equal in status in every way. A woman brings her own unique take to everything and we need to respect that level of talent and intelligence without discrimination or bias.

Keywords: Indian Cinema, Women, Gender Bias, Unequal Treatment, Restitution

Behind the bright lights, the greasepaint, and the world of celluloid make-believe lurks an open secret that nobody wants to talk about. Or rather, when spoken about, the topic is easily brushed away or falls on deaf ears. From the inception of cinema on Indian shores, women have been given the short end of the stick. The very first silent movie was *Raja Harishchandra* and the female character was played by a man. The first time an actual female was given the job, was in *Mother India*. The depiction of a frail woman braving the odds and struggling appealed to the masses and it became a benchmark of sorts to have a heroine who had to struggle against patriarchy both on and off the screen. Actresses were derided for choosing this profession and perceived as women of questionable morals. Unrealistic

depictions of women shored up the belief that they were the weaker sex and set ridiculous social conventions in place. Demure and meek women were celebrated and a woman who spoke out was deemed to be unfit and a shrew. Pigeon-holing women into certain strata also made it a demeaning and misogynistic exercise. In his 1972 essay on art criticism, *Ways of Seeing*, English art critic and novelist John Berger said, “Men act, women appear. Men watch, women watch themselves being watched”, adding to his analysis of the representation of women across media while bringing up the concept of the ‘male gaze’.

India has a film culture that is cross-cultural and localized. There is the much-vaunted Bollywood, Tollywood, Kollywood, etc. However, it can be noted that the pan-India gender tag does not alter the status of the depiction of women. What is alarming and a matter of concern is how the scripts, literature, and depiction have a kind of sameness that is exploitative and demeaning. The audiences, especially the male half tend to subconsciously emulate what is shown on screen as quasi-gospel truth. They think that this is the way to think, and act and assume that this is the social norm without much application for thinking. A parallel industry is film magazines with a healthy scoop of speculation, gossip, and unverified incidents. Here too, the women are given short shrift with a lot of attached speculation, and each action of theirs is scrutinized under the social microscope and found wanting in manners, morals, or both. It is cringeworthy in the extreme to see how the industry has been spawned of paparazzi who chase after film stars and invade their privacy to the point that it borders on indecency.

As per a 2017 report by the Geena Davis Institute, only one in ten directors in Bollywood are women. Other statistics reveal that the screen time for females was a mere 31.5 percent, against the 68.5 percent received by male actors. Due to the disparity in the number of men when compared to women in key off-screen processes such as script-writing, film-making, and direction, female characters in Bollywood have been presented through the eyes of a largely male perspective, resulting in the age-old stereotypes and gender biases that prevail in films. Gender bias can travel across decades, and we still have not completely rid ourselves of archaic notions that existed half a century ago. This begs the question that if so much progress has been made in other sections of society regarding the social standing of women, and the respectful delineation in other areas, why is a highly fictionalised version of women portrayed as a half-truth and this is insinuated into the cultural thinking as an accepted norm? I am using two examples of this portrayal in filmology today. One is *The Great Indian Kitchen* - a Malayalam movie that hits frighteningly close to the truth about how

the average Indian woman subsumes her hopes, dreams, and desires in the pitiless realm of the kitchen which is like a lifelong shackle. The other movie is 'Jaya, Jaya, Jaya He' another Malayalam movie in which the woman is expected to accept whatever a man dishes out within the framework of marriage. Both the female protagonists rose above their situations in the movies but the unacceptable truth is that there are thousands of women living stoically in such circumstances with no way out. When men are portrayed on screen in a supposedly macho way including eve teasing and having no respect for decent boundaries, it sets a precedent for a generation of besotted men to do likewise and not be censured by society.

Cinema is an idea that has the power to deeply influence through its platform. Ideas can be skillfully endorsed and manipulated in the public conscience. Why can't it be used as an instrument of positive change? Rome was not built in a day, but we can pave the way to a better-balanced society by emphasizing the humanistic and real position of women. There should be some eye-opening and constructive enterprise in making gender-neutral assumptions and a just way of impartial depictions. Wrong portrayals lead to violence against women, body shaming, one-dimensional characterizations, and a general disrespect for women in their multiplicity of roles. A powerful platform used rightly can be the change that is desperately needed.

There is a need to laud women in their roles in the film industry-whether as producers, directors, or on the screen itself. Let us not diminish a woman by virtue of her gender. Cinema has come a long way and has a long road to traverse ahead. It should be an outpouring of talent and ideas, not petty gender discrimination that dominates the credits at the end of the show. There are stories to be told, those that need to be heard and lessons to be subconsciously imbibed. Let it be an equal path and a recognition of a respectful endeavor.