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Portrayal of women in Bollywood: a focus group approach

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, Indian cinema has been trying to present women in effective and rational roles but the situation is less satisfactory and adequate. If we examine the historical facts then we will find there are only a few Bollywood films in which female characters dominated the big screen. Whilst, the characters of films hugely influence the audiences of all ages with regards to gender stereotype Neuendorf et. al¹. Despite the fact, women in Bollywood are being portrayed from being submissive to hyper sexualized roles. The study was conducted to investigate “what did college girls think about the films portrayal of women and how did this portrayal influence their everyday life”. A convenience sample of 20 girls was chosen to discuss the effect of film in their life. The study found that all the girls agreed that women presentation in films was not positive and women were presented as a sexual product. They argued that due to this stereotyped imposition women were being mistreated, attacked, and rejected in the society. The films were developing an unrealistic image of modern women through the popular images. And they also asserted that this degrade portrayal of women in films putting an extra psychological pressure on them to be slim, honest, careful, virgin, beautiful, sexy, etc. The study is an attempt to investigate the role of films in women lives and how to save the women from this extra pressure.

KEYWORD: Films, women, Bollywood, influence, portrayal.

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Background of the study

*“Films are one of the great storehouses of society's stereotypes about women”
Blewett²*

Women are portrayed in various roles and forms in Bollywood cinema. But critics claim that Indian cinema presents women either conventional or western ways and all these roles are influenced with male dominant perspectives. Therefore, the stereotypical portrayal of the ideal and submissive Indian woman in commercial Bollywood has been a matter of concern Das Gupta³. Further, women are classified in the mainstream media and especially in the commercial film industry as object. She is rarely depicted playing an effective and leading role against the male counterparts. Mostly, actresses appear in stereotyped and conventional roles as a sister, mother, beloved, item girl, wife to please and assist the hero.

Whereas, it has proved that films are most powerful medium for setting the agenda and influencing the opinion, attitude, behavior and culture of people. Consequently, Indian audience has clandestinely fantasized the one and only ideal and traditional women and secondly consuming and entertaining the sexualized role of women. But, Bollywood films do not portray women as much as positive and independent roles to exist without any restraint in male dominant society.

So, one has to develop a new theory of such analysis against the backdrop of the Indian socio-economic backdrop within which the real woman lives and works and study the intersections of these with celluloid women in Indian cinema. How distanced are the real women from the celluloid women? Does distancing help nurture better images of the celluloid women or does it hinder the image more and thus distance the audience from these films? Globalization has changed it all and one needs to look at the woman portrayals in Hindi cinema in 2010 with new eyes and through a new pair of glasses tinted with the razzmatazz of Western packaging, sophisticated marketing strategies, the launching of music and stars taking part in reality shows to plug their about-to-be-released films Soma Chatterji⁴.

As a result, each decade has portrayed its own brand of women in Bollywood cinema. For a long time, women have generally played decorative objects in cinema. Even in movies, where she had important roles, she is more victims and martyrs or victimizers of hands of other women. Rarely have films portrayed women as strong women who can raise their voice against social injustice, who can dissenter and agitator in their own way and make their own stand. The average woman has scarcely been visible in Bollywood films. Drastically, right from the 1990s the body of the heroine have become as or more important than the face.

In consequence of this, the portrayals of the women is also an imaginary depiction that is wholly distanced from the Indian women on the streets, villages or towns, literate or illiterate, working or non-working and so on. Secondly, ethical values have changed to a large extent too because premarital sex, adultery, sexual overtures where the women takes the initiative are quite common and have also got audience acceptance. Moreover, the films are developing unrealistic expectations among men of how women should be looked or behaved as well as psychological disorders such as body dysmorphic, anorexia, bulimia are also increasing among in women. In addition, sexual violence against female is filmed as a fun, enjoyable and a normal of romantic love. Though, women are shown mostly as victims rather than men but harassments by heroes are not seriously but romanticism involved in it. Because male actors are painted as super human beings in terms of power, sacrifices, challenge therefore, moderate sexual violence committed by him treated as fun and romanticism.

Conceptual framework

The study is based on the following theories.

Cultivation effect theory

Viewers who spend more time watching films or television have the higher inclination to see the real world in ways that images depicts in the films George Grebner⁵. Therefore, the images of women which have become a part of culture, commercial purposes, and western norms are influencing the viewers positively.

Social cognitive theory

According to the Albert Bandura⁶ we learn by observing the things. People in nature are easily persuaded and influenced and feeling attached or having common interest may lead observers to learn the behaviors watched. However, the choice whether or not to adapt the behavior is still in their hands. In this way, the viewers who exposed to such roles of women that contain sexual persuasion, male domination, violence against women, and negativity, the higher risk to affect the psychology and behavior of viewers.

Selected Review of Literature

The study has included the review of some significant literature on the subject:

Srijita Sarkar⁷ in her study concludes that representation of women in some good films encourage social change in the treatment of women in Indian society, which is mostly very male-dominated and patriarchal, by showing a woman as emotionally and economically independent. Therefore, by highlighting domestic violence, abuse, exploitation, male dominance etc movies are bringing these problems upfront, also by allowing women to talk publically.

Bollywood commercial movies portrayed "ideal women" as submissive, self sacrificing, virtuous, and controlled Dasgupta and Hegde⁸. On the other hand, the bad woman is illustrated as individualistic, sexually violent, westernized, and not sacrificing. Bollywood films have constantly hyped the image of ideal Indian woman who accepts every kind of injustice and brutality and hostility meted out towards her by every man and society. Gokulsing & Dissanayake⁹ argued that despite the global changes, women are still portrayed as an inferior character in most commercial Hindi films even today. This stereotypical representation of women in Bollywood films is generally due to historical, religious and cultural reasons.

Humira Nooristani¹⁰ Indian cinema is a male-dominated industry, meaning the portrayal of women in films is a reflection of the woman's role in Indian society from a man's viewpoint. These films mold opinions, and often encourage the poor treatment of women. Often, Bollywood productions focus on the plight of wealthy women, whose treatment at the hands of the men in their lives is offset by their comfortable lifestyles. At the same time, though, most of them omit the difficulties that women of lower socio-economic backgrounds face on a daily basis, such as the harassment on buses and streets that showed itself at its worst in the recent mob rape of two young women. While Bollywood seems to have no problem showing men how women should be treated, it has so far shied away from investigating the repercussions of this behavior.

These movies have portrayed women as sexual objects the way men would enjoy seeing them on the silver screen. Film creates such a space for female sexual objectification and exploitation through the combination of the patriarchal order of society, and 'looking' in itself as a pleasurable act of voyeurism, as "the cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking. Mulvey Laura¹¹. In Vogue, it can be concluded that sexualized images of women are the principal way of portraying women in positions of inferiority and low social power Lindner and Katharina¹².

The popularity of Bollywood films in India rapids speculation on the social consequences of media portrayal of women and these depictions are potentially very damaging. They are not only showing a patriarchal world but also reinforcing existing dichotomy of sex roles. The persistently negative portrayal of women in India's Bollywood has had the effect of validating women's inferiority as real and natural. The end result can only be a progressive debilitation of women's self-image Kaul¹³.

Sowmya Nandakumar¹⁴ studied that what role a women perform onscreen was more often than not, the male director's concept of what roles women should to play. This idea is based on the director's perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and values, related with what the director thinks viewers want to watch. What viewers want to watch is something that conforms to their beliefs, attitudes and values, which come from the social framework within which they live, which is the same social

framework in which directors, live. There has to be a consistency in the beliefs, attitudes and values of all those involved.

In his article Derné, S.¹⁵ argues that popular films play a role in generating sexual violence in India. Bollywood films do more than portray violence against women; they eroticize such violence and ask male viewers to identify with heroes who use force to win the affections of their beloveds. The study also reveals that men's understanding of ideal relationships between husbands and wives and the ideals presented in Hindi films. Further it is observed that usually male-dominated space of cinema halls is an arena for the male sexual harassment that films show as generating women's affections.

Eventually, the sexual objectification of women in Bollywood film has a detrimental effect on young women and girls. Evidences show that when a girl is exposed to films in which female super heroes are dressed in over-sexualized costumes, she becomes more aware of her own body fitness. Additionally, the exposure impacts her views of the female gender and female roles. Such over-sexualization in popular Bollywood films moves away from girl's self-esteem and persuade them to desire to modify their bodies to look more like the heroines in films Pennell and Behm Moravitz¹⁶.

Research questions

The study was conducted to find out the answers of the following questions:

1. What are the opinions of college girls about the women portrayal in the Bollywood films?
2. How these portrayals of women influence girls' psychology and their everyday personal life?

Research designing

The following research methodology was followed to meet the answers:

Focus groups are originally used within communication study to explore the effect of films and television programmes. It is particularly useful for exploring people knowledge and experiences and cannot be used to examine not only what they people think but how they think and why they think that way Nagle B. and William, N.¹⁷.

The Dharamshala College was selected for the study because it is the oldest college of the state and has more population of female than male students in the state colleges. Further, a group of 20 girls' student of final years was chosen through non-probability sampling method (convenience sample). Later this group was divided in to two groups and invited to discuss on the topic that took 3-hour and two days.

RESULTS

Most of the participants (91%) admitted that the Bollywood films mostly depicted women as in stereotyped, seductive, conventional and feeble forms while 9% supported films for presenting women in powerful roles. Asking “did films project women’s unreal images among males’ eyes? All of the sample blamed films for using derogatory words such as go wear the bangles, implying that women are incapable and worthless and creating a inferior and weak image of women in society. Films characterize weak and helpless women that are more religious and believe in their destiny. And always remain standing for the help of God. The story of the films tells the people that women’s world start with the existence of men. Her story moves around to fulfill the main objective and challenge of his hero. Bollywood films paint good women as submissive, shy, wives, mothers, who wear salwar-kameez or sari, do not speak in front of elders, and eat after her family. The Bollywood rarely presents women strong and intelligent who do bear violence and argue with elder on wrong things.

Participants also argue that the objective of presenting women as sexual object is to sell the films. After extensive viewing of these type of movies the mentality of boys are changed. They think teasing a girl frequently can make her to accept her love or friendship proposal. Because, most of the story of our films are started with the approaches and standpoint in which heroes tease the heroine. Firstly the heroine rejects the hero and then later accepts him. The Bollywood are developing this thinking in women minds that people adore the beauty and slimness. Therefore, they try to focus mostly on their cosmetics, body and clothes. Unrealistic and imaginary presentations of women’s in various forms are convincing men to expect his life partner and girlfriends like film actresses. During discussion when they were asked “were they see any relation or connection between a rape victim and a woman portrayed in Bollywood films? Almost 69% said they thought there might be directly and indirectly some connection in this matter. Only 16% could not say anything about this. 15% did not believe on this fact. In most of the films when a baby born and if it is a baby boy it is said mubark ho ladka hua hai but never says mubark ho ladki hui hai. This leads to a preferential treatment of boys in families’ right from their birth. The Indian Constitution conferred equal rights on men and women to eradicate gender inequality in the year 1950. But hardly any film throws light on this aspect.

Most of the girls believe that the role played by the actresses in films is mostly the male director’s idea of what roles they would play. This idea is based on the film maker’s perception, beliefs, and personal opinion of viewers demand. Today, women in Bollywood are presented as sexual objects. Instead of projecting and focusing on the other prospective of women, films stress on women’s sexuality, beauty and manner. On asking were they see any change in recent years portrayal of

women in films, most of the respondents said Somewhat, Bollywood films had changed in recent years to depict the woman as more of an equal to her male counterpart and less of an object; their roles were more career-driven and less subservient.

Further, talking about the women's item songs in films, almost 93% participants was considered it a degradation of women images by the infamous songs like Munni Badnam hui etc. such type of portrayal is a terrible disrespect to the women because women are leveled item girls which referred a vulgar woman. In this way, most of Bollywood movies are not only objectifying women but also promoting stalking. Therefore, most Hero's in Bollywood films think Stalking is cool.

Some women centric films such as Fashion, Heroine, Page 3, Corporate or Dirty Picture that have featured women's social issues and their social and sexual abuse. However, these films ironically paint women's different images which get ruined by their freedom that was accompanied by success. They were also shown using alcohol, drugs, when they were successful and finished with weak destiny. Even in movies like Lazza, Damini, Bandit queen, Water, etc. women were seen helpless and sought the assistance of men. So, it is concluded these films are also not free from gender stereotypes.

On the discussion, why we should worry about the portrayal of women in films, most of the sample argued that movies reflected social attitudes more truthfully than any other mass medium and it reached the greatest number of people. Today, films are launched nationally and world widely, and these films identify the image of a society. The issue of rapes in India had become globally a subject of discussion many times. Therefore, it's the need of the hour to empower the women and Bollywood films can be acted as a catalyst in this context.

Querying about what they felt when they heard some derogatory dialogues such as 'Jaa Choodiyan Pehen Ke Beth Jaa, (go wear bangles and sit down). The entire group told these types of dialogues delivered negative messages about a woman that she is incapable, useless and intellectually and socially inferior to men. Now time has changed and most of the women nationally and internationally have become successful. Ahead, the influence of historical and socio-cultural factors on the growth of women's roles in commercial Indian films suggests the stereotypical portrayal of women cinema plays an essential role in shaping views about gender roles and gender identities within the Indian context where women are viewed as playing subordinate roles to men.

Almost all the films, moves around the most common stereotype subject of Love interest. The main heroine is always portrayed as the Hero's love interest and has little else to perform in the movie apart from please the hero with her beauty, romance and stereotypical images. For years, this stereotype has become a common culture that it is not inquired. The heroine is rarely portrayed as an

individual with intelligence, her independent thoughts and thinking pertaining to anything other than romance and family are not portrayed.

To some extent, Indian cinema is sensitive in telling stories which is completely based on malevolence against women's lives like sexual stalking, rape, murder cases etc. The purposes of these films are to create awareness about women issues and arouse consciousness among the audience of the consequences of enacting these offensive acts. These categories of movies can be used to spread a social message among the people. Along with this point, it also determines the gap that exists between portrayal of the view point of male and female directors of the films.

Discussion and conclusion

Assuming social constructivism, we believe that these images of gender representation in movies affect our perception of what a man or a woman is. More importantly, the movies can shape societies' viewpoints, reinforcing the discrimination; over time people can and have accepted that women are inferior. Somewhat, Bollywood films have changed in recent years. But, these trends are not enough. Bollywood can become more progressive on women's issues by portraying lives of ordinary women living in South Asia, and the challenges they have to face on a daily basis. Bollywood has a powerful role in shaping mindsets and behaviors in India.

Limitations

The study has two prime limitations. Particularly, the findings are based on the small sample of size of college girls' students and therefore, the results cannot be generalized. Secondly, these girls had no systematic knowledge about the film studies.

Implications

The main implication of this study was that representation of women in such films encourages social change in the treatment of women in Indian society, which is very male-dominated and patriarchal, by showing women as emotionally and economically independent. Therefore, by acknowledging the open-secrets like domestic violence, abuse etc, it brings these problems upfront, by allowing women to talk about it in public.

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