

## **Cinematic categorization of gender identities from the gaze of sociological imagination**

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**Abstract:** Cinema has been a popular source of entertainment with primarily domesticated closures. This paper is an attempt to show, how Hindi cinematic projections, become a social fact and start exercising constraint on the audience to construct their everyday lives as per the projected and stereotypical categorizations of femininity and masculinity.

**Keywords:** Cinema, gender, identities, masculinity, femininity

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Sociological approach in general and ethnomethodology in particular, view 'self' as a constructed reality which emerges in and is reflective of, society. This constructed self gives rise to social categories, popularly understood as identities, which are formed and shaped within the society. This formation and shaping takes place while there is interaction with other existent selves.

In this interaction, Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble*<sup>1</sup> opines that 'identity politics' takes place. She argues that the body is not a "mute facticity"<sup>2</sup>, but is produced by discourses just as gender is. Gender identities are performative, producing a series of effects. Everyday interactions and existence, consolidate our impression of what gender identity we are. Over a period of time, we act as if that identity is predisposed and is a part of our internal reality. But Butler states that gender identity is a phenomenon that is being produced and reproduced all the time. Institutional powers like psychiatric normalization, the socio-cultural discourses and socio-political nuances, all try to coerce the individual, to accommodate themselves in the image which the society has preordained or drafted for them as given.

Michel Foucault's<sup>3</sup> historical analyses of the different ways in which humans develop knowledge about themselves resulted in a body of scholarship which suggests that there is a complex interplay of constraint, choice and action. He conceptualizes the process of the subject production as interplay of various technologies which human beings use to understand themselves and while showing both specific nature of those technologies and their constant interaction, Foucault enables us to frame the process of identity construction in terms of interplay of structure and agency. He, in context similar to that of Butler, argues that people don't have a 'real' fixed identity within themselves. The identity is communicated to others in our interactions with them. This, interacting, in-making, flexible identity, is a shifting temporary construction, both in terms of space and time and is constructed from the materials available to the people in making.

### **II. CINEMA AS A 'TECHNOLOGY OF SELF'**

One of the key 'technologies of self' is the popular discourse, which examines the ways in which power, through a tangible and sociologically manifested gaze, operates within everyday relations between people. These popular discourses in general and cinema in particular, do not identify objects but actually compose them. Interestingly, in practice of composing them, it obscures its own contraption. To the audience, it is received as an image which is socially operative and approved. This seemingly 'given', though 'performative'

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<sup>1</sup>Butler Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. United States: Routledge.(1999).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.:129

<sup>3</sup>Foucault Michel. 1988a. "Technologies of the self". In Martin, L.H., Gutman, H. & Hutton, P.H. (Ed.) *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts.(1988). 16-49.

construction, when narrated through the tool of visual technology, involves a multi-layered operation in the narrative realism, which very effectively creates a 'reality effect'.

The entire narrative, in a popular discourse of visual technology called cinema is so designed that it appears thoroughly domesticated to the audience. George Lukacs<sup>4</sup> described this as the ongoing control maintained by a narrative perspective, where the narrative leads us in to experience and interpret what it chooses to show us. The gear of cinema, including the camera and projectors and the style of film production, including the ways in which scenes are framed, merged and edited to construct narratives, as well as cinema's methods of reproduction and projection which creates a possibility of a single film to be projected on a screen for multiple screenings and in different geographies at the same time, marks cinema as one of the most powerful visual technologies ever developed.

### **III. CONSTRUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITIES**

Since identities, as discussed earlier, are formed from materials available in popular discourse, this paper studies the construction and reproduction of gender identities through the Hindi cinematic gaze (in specific). Gender identity, here would refer to an individual's personal sense of identity as masculine or feminine, or some combination thereof, as alternative sexualities. These are assemblage of structures in which we all participate either consciously or unconsciously.

Through the cinematic scaffold, there appear to be six heterosexual frames in which various categories of femininity and masculinity are operating, all of which are inter(active) and performed. The rigidly structured identities, according to Simon De Beauvoir<sup>5</sup>, make negotiations to choose between either body or freedom. The latter choice would push the choice-makers to the margins of social normalcy, and would drive them to become labeled as deviants. On the contrary, if one chooses the 'body', the negotiation bestows upon the choice maker, a normal identity. Over a temporal zone, they are subtly reduced to objects and socio-politico-culturally, the feeling of empowerment and self-tangibility is sipped away.

The domesticated cinematic gaze plays a significant role in reducing the categorized acting frames and their interaction with the audience, to a consolidated narrative of acceptable representation and receptive closure. Thus the gender identities carved on the screens appear to be 'the reality.'

### **IV. FEMININE GENDER IDENTITIES**

#### **4.1 The Contingent femininity**

The first sub-category of feminine gender identity is thenormal, readily acceptable feminine identity, which is brought to the audience in the Contingent frame, where she is representative of dependability and reliability. Her gendered essence is shown to be relational, either as a wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law, etc. Though the contemporary socio-cultural frame does see education as a manifest domain of status;keeping in tune, the narrative gets represented in binaries, in public and private. But, interestingly, while being translated into cinematic narration, where it is presented to the audience as "the career oriented" vs. the "family woman", the emphasis on the former is minimal, reducing such an identity to an estranged alienated self.

As an illustration, amongst the two Best Popular films for wholesome Entertainment, both directed by SoorajBarjatya, '*Hum AapkeHainKaun*' and '*Hum SaathSaathHain*', scripted in their frames, professionally 'sound' Madhuri Dixit and SonaliBendre; but throughout the movie, neither Madhuri (a computer scientist) is shown even in remote proximity to a computer nor is SonaliBendre (a doctor) brought to the audience celebrating her professional skills. Bendre's 'feminine conduct' has been tendered an appreciation on screen only through her culinary skills wherein the '*gajjarkahalwa*' for Salman Khan is shown as a measure of her true worth, as a family woman.

Even a character as sketchy as Shaina in '*Kick*' gets to be a psychiatrist, but of course her main job is to be eye-candy. In most Bollywood Diaspora, the 'normal' woman falling within the contingent frame, functions as "items" or as male-props, bunged in purely for visual pleasure. Their conduct is essentially shaped and framed by male beliefs, behaviors and demands. These are accepted as 'normalized', for women play secondary role to men and there is a continuous struggle with the problem of producing femininity that secures male approval. This contingent femininity is 'sexualized', i.e. fashioned through the male eye and fantasies.

Interestingly, this contingent feminine identity constitutes a large part of popular Hindi cinema, where the storyline revolves around "how to get 'the' girl," who is dependable and henceforth qualifies to be a part of the 'to be married to' category. Such category women are treated as objects, reducing them to being vulnerable

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<sup>4</sup>Timothy, Bewes. "How to escape from literature? Lukacs, Cinema and The Theory of the Novel" In Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (Ed.) *Georg Lukacs: The fundamental Dissonance of Existence, Aesthetics, Politics, Literature*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group. (2011). 36-48.

<sup>5</sup>Beauvoir, Simon de. [1949]. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Penguin Random House. 2011.

and therefore dependent on masculine body frames. This empowers the patriarchal male to stretch out his ownership over such passive and mute objects, who even when they deny the submission/romantic stride, are subject to harassment with a presumptive narrative, under the garb of romance, that a woman is too shy to say she wants a man, and the man must actively take her coy attitude to mean “yes.”

One of the most celebrated numbers in Hindi cinema is ‘*Jummachumma de*’ from Mukul S. Anand’s 1991 direction, ‘*Hum*’. Nightmarishly, throughout the number, KimiKatkhar keeps on saying “no” to the crowd led by Amitabh Bachchan, for a kiss. The denial, drenched in mugs of alcohol, is repeatedly overlooked and the entire mosaic of scenes in the music number compels the audience to focus only on the feminine body, sensuous dance moves, assertive patriarchal power structures; candidly ignoring the very voice of a female and her choice.

Another part of this contingent, dependent feminine category are those women, who are submissive, ready to be objectified, yet not ‘to be married to’ category. They can be loud in their body but surely not freedom. She submits to be used as a male prop or in the cinematic linguistics, as an item number (as mentioned earlier). The only space she gets on the screen is when and where, the term and the song in question, objectify and commodify her. She is subjected to the voyeuristic and fetishistic male response. For instance, ‘*ChikniChameli*’ from ‘*Agneepath*’, where Katrina Kaifboasts about her slender waist and sees that as the only asset, is being subjected to the shredding gaze of an ogling crowd of men. ‘*Fevicol Se*’ in ‘*Dabangg 2*’ features a hyper masculine Salman Khan throwing around alcohol while encouraging Kareena Kapoor to “swing in intoxication.” She reduces, objectifies and compares her bodily dependence to a piece of meat, to be swallowed with alcohol. In another recent item number, ‘*MunniBadnaamHui*’, from ‘*Dabangg*’, the main character boasts about how he has “defamed” a girl, all while drinking alcohol. These item numbers are frequently situated in brothels, with scores of men ogling at prostitutes.

This immature projection in Hindi cinema of the other side of the threshold is particularly disturbing, considering that in modern India, prostitutes are often a part of a sex trafficking trade that affects 27 million women and children per year. It is indicative of an industry that has, for many years, included hit songs and dance numbers that feature hyper-sexualized images—a contradiction in a country that frowns upon public displays of affection.

#### 4.2 The Intractable femininity

The second sub-category of the feminine identity, include the deviant and the intractable feminine, who can be further subdivided into the aggressive and the autonomous types. The assertive feminine selves bring to the audience the girl power, emphasizing on sex as fun and throwing importance of female friendships as mechanism of coping with masculinity. Prakash Jha’s ‘*Mritudand*’ and Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury’s ‘*Pink*’ are two of my personal favorites in this context.

Madhuri Dixit as Ketaki in ‘*Mritudand*’ is educated and unwilling to submit. Her rumblings of dissent empower the other women in the family. They, being her sister-in-law (ShabanaAzmi) who, unwilling to publicly disclose that her husband (Mohan Agashe) is impotent, suffers for 17 years the burden of “being barren” and her maid (Shilpa Shirodkar), who must repay her husband’s loans with sexual favors. Prakash Jha through his discourse permits the right of elderly women to be fashionably active and accepts them as active sexual beings. He gracefully handles Azmi’s hesitant romance with Om Puri, one of Hindi Cinema’s rare middle-age love affairs. On similar lines, Chowdhury’s ‘*Pink*’, breaks open the Indian skull with a hammer and drills into it the basic concepts of human dignity, respect and honour vis-à-vis women.

Closely associated with this aggression is the cinematic portrayal of autonomous women, a portrayal which got a shot in the arm with the blockbuster success of VidyaBalan’s, ‘*The Dirty Picture*’. The actor and the narrative comes to the audience as one who compete with men on female terms, forming heterosexual non-committal relationships. Milan Luthria, in this film gave to audience an inside to a woman who is both empowered by and victim of her sexuality.

Autonomous and subtly rebellious existence is also thematically screened through AlankritaShrivastava’s ‘*Lipstick Under My Burkha*’. Here the narrative revolves around the deviant urge for the secrecy which is intended to hide the denial of the “normal everyday repressions”. Usha (played by Ratna Pathak Shah) is a single-woman whose life has been shelved at 55 years of age. Much against the popular, domesticated discourse, which goes a long way in deciding the on-screen life of a cinema, Shrivastava lets this *buaji* live craftily through Hindi pulp novels that she reads hidden behind religious texts. She goes for swimming lessons in the garb of *satsang* and she also indulges in surreptitious phone sex.

Intractable femininity is viewed as deviant because it is non-compliant with the societal norms and therefore are relegated to the socio-cultural margins. When compared with contingent femininity, members are also objectified but at least manifestly are not subjected to pain and suffering.

## V. MASCULINE GENDER IDENTITIES

Unlike feminine gender identities, which have been brought to the audience in the polar opposite frames of contingent versus the intractable, masculinities in cinema have been brought to the audience through a much more liberal categorization spacing it under four categories, ranging from the subversive to the hyper-masculine, through the retributive the complicit ones.

### 5.1 The Subversive masculinity

The subordinate, subversive masculinities are generally the lesser forms of masculinity. It comprises of men who are unable or unwilling to perform hegemonic masculinity, through what Judith Butler refers to as the gender performative role responsibility of a bread winner. These can also be visualized as alternative masculinities which challenge and undermine hegemonic masculinity. The inability of Guru Dutt in 'Pyasa', to carve out his own individuality, (his poems lamenting about the poor, the destitute, and the arrogance of the rich, all of which is socially encapsulated as creativity and sensitivity which is stereotyped as feminine manifestations), make him a social misfit. Therefore such masculinities are compelled to wipe themselves off. Guru Dutt's friendship with the prostitute is representative of the fact that such masculine identities which cease to be hegemonic must be pushed to the margins.

### 5.2 The Retributive masculinity

Through the popular cinematic discourses the aim to reclaim traditional hegemonic masculinity from 'emasculated' peers, gives rise to what Rutherford<sup>6</sup> calls 'Retributive Masculinity'. This is brought to the audience as an attempt to reassert traditional masculine authority by celebrating traditionally male concerns in their content i.e. 'birds, booze, and brawl'. This identity is rigidly patriarchal, aggressive, oppositional, forceful and reclaimational. Easthope<sup>7</sup> argues that all media (Hollywood films) transmit the view that masculinity based on strength, aggression, competition and violence is biologically determined. He states that 'men aspire to be like (these Hollywood) action heroes and they internalize the fact that men should have physical, cultural and emotional power and therefore this ideal becomes part of their male identity'.

Sanjoy, in 'Daman', a not so popular narrative, directed by KalpanaLajmi, is awarded the unidirectional entitlements to temper tantrums, alcoholism, and patronizing prostitutes. His family decides to get him married to a woman named, Durga (played by RaveenaTandon), who comes from a lower caste and a poor family. A transcript of the marginalized, in terms of mute female gender, carrying the burden of passivity and brutality of caste and poverty. She is 'accepted' to live with the retributive masculinity of Sanjoy.

### 5.3 The Complicit masculinity

Post 1990s, Hindi cinema saw the emergence of a complicit metro-sexual masculine identity which was newly feminized. Here the reference is to Rodney Lippard's<sup>8</sup> understanding of metro-sexuality (and not to Mark Simpson's<sup>9</sup> 1994 argument in which gay men were seen as early prototypes of metro-sexuality).

Unlike the retributive, complicit metro-sexual masculinity is gentler and less obdurate, existing in a world where love and family are important. The cinema narratives brought to the audience, a set of newly engineered men who do not hesitate to cry, can cook and still are strong, attractive, and empowering. For this newly crafted male, emotional repression and physical force are no longer the only indicators to measure his masculinity.

Shah Rukh Khan and Akshay Kumar are epitomes par excellence of such complicit metro-sexual identities in Hindi cinema today. Another illustrative reference can be made of R. Balki's 'Ki and Ka'. This narrative brought to the audience Kabir (played by Arjun Kapoor) who is handsome, muscular, intelligent, son of a wealthy businessman, yet chooses to be a househusband.

### 5.4 The hyper-masculinity

The fourth masculine identity, can be traced to the 1970s era of Hindi cinema which was dominated by what Rosie Thomas<sup>10</sup> terms as 'macho melodrama'. Masculinity was represented through the figure of the rebel

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<sup>6</sup>Abbott, M.E. *The Street was mine: White masculinity in Hardboiled fiction and film noir*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (2002).

<sup>7</sup>Easthope, A. *'What a man's gotta do': The masculine myth in popular culture*. London: Paladin. (1986).

<sup>8</sup>Lippard, Rodney. "The Metrosexual and Youth Culture" In Shirley Steinberg, PriyaParmar and Birgit Richa (Ed.) *Contemporary Youth Culture – An International Encyclopaedia*. Volume I. Westport: Greenwood Press. (2006).

<sup>9</sup>[http://www.marksimpson.com/pages/journalism/mirror\\_men.html](http://www.marksimpson.com/pages/journalism/mirror_men.html)

<sup>10</sup>Gabriel, Karen. *Melodrama and the Nation – Sexual Economies of Bombay Cinema 1970-2000*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited. (2010). 180.

and the first film to popularize this vigilante figure was 'Zanjeer'. Tall, angular, with trademark deep voice and noticeably darker than preceding heroes, was the then Amitabh Bachchan who epitomized macho-ism<sup>11</sup>. Karen Gabriel<sup>12</sup> sees masculinities in 70s as defined by violence, lack of coherence and absence of feminine traits. According to her, such a mode of masculinity was a response to the then contemporary social and political factors, such as political and economic instability and social change, calling for uncertainty. In this background, the "angry young man" described a masculine state of mind and mode of being, which validated anger as the right kind of response to the above mentioned socio-structural complexities.

Gabriel's association between the socio-structural complexities and cinema does hold relevance even today, when we visualize similar shades of hyper-masculinity in the current cinematic narrations. The vast gap between the rich and the poor, the illegitimate power spill from chairs of authority to their dependents, the aggressive packs of bodies sustained through uncelebrated body-building, all have been neatly fed in cinematic scripts. This over a period of time, starts to script the everyday life. Angad Bedi, in 'Pink', who is brought to the audience as the spoiled son of a politician, 'raging and frothing' with hyper-virile masculinity and institutional entitlement, is one such example. Allauddin Khilji (played by Ranveer Singh), in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 'Padmaavat', before leaving for Chittor palace, empties a bottle of perfume on a slave girl, lifts her and rubs her on himself. This speaks aloud of the stout-heartedness to be seen by audience as manliness. In another scene, after being beheaded, the decapitated body of a Rajput lieutenant kept on wielding a sword.

It is popularly understood that hyper-masculinity which is authoritarian and autocratic, contemptuous and violent, particularly appeals to the middle aged men because of its ability to provide certainty of what it means to be 'masculine'. Sadly, this label has been undergoing modification all in tune with insensitivity towards human dignity and integrity leading to a much greater and intense sociological problem.

## VI. CONCLUSION

It would certainly be presumptuous for the author to assume that Hindi cinema is the only reason for the rapid decline in human dignity and integrity shaping through sexual violence and gender stereotyping in India. But through sociological imagination we can observe that cinema narratives are indeed indicative of cultural norms and trends. Culture coerces us to conduct gender performances. While conducting, we are not just acting it like in performance but also actively constructing it as we act it out. The stereotypical portrayal of gender identities thematically reinforces the givens. Gender reality becomes performative, and we fail to understand that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. If we refuse to perform our gender script, gender will cease to exist and so would the painful categorization which compels us to stay forever in fixed set of socio-cultural attributes.

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