

THE FEMINIST STUDY OF WIDOWHOOD IN WOMEN CENTRIC FILMS OF HINDI CINEMA

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Abstract: Mass media create awareness on the social issues. In fourth wave of feminism help was taken from media to fight for the rights of the women and to create awareness among public. This paper discusses the plight of the widows in Indian societies. Two Hindi films are selected for feminist study i.e. Chandini Bar (2001) & Water (2005). And it is revealed that in both movies the sufferings of bereavement are same. Feminist approach is applied to discuss the problems of widow women. In this study, movies are taken into consideration because most of the people watch movies instead to read books. On every occasion of celebration, most of the people like to go to watch movies. The study of Butalia reveals, 'Indian cinema is the single largest medium of communication with the masses, and close to 12 million people are watching films every week in cinema houses and theaters'(Butalia 108). According to Weinberg, 'mass media of communication like television, radio, movies, newspaper and magazines play a crucial role in creating awareness about the scope and urgency of social problems' (Weinberg 5). Cinema has the ability to set agendas because the social, political, cultural, educational, and economic and all the other issues are immediately taken up onto the screen and shouted upon. 'Cinema is a highly impressionistic medium and it is important for this medium to be an instrument that enables people to think differently and empathize with alternative perceptions of reality' (Sharma 5).

Keywords: Widowhood, Feminism, Hindi cinema, religious interpretation, Prostitution, economic hardships.

Introduction:

Cinema is the cheap source of learning while entertaining oneself. Many issues and problems can bring upfront of the public through cinema. Many movies explain the theoretical framework of the culture of a particular society within cultural stereotypes. Unintentionally people learn a lot from a cinema. According to Ahmed 1992, "Many films in India are made in respect to what is going on in the society and cinema has also had massive influence on shaping up the society's beliefs, practices and providing a new insight into the social milieu" (Sarkar 4). Even it brings awareness to illiterate persons. Movies are much viewed as compared to books.

Only Hindi movies are selected for study because Hindi is the national link language of India. Throughout India and even in foreign counties, Hindi movies are much appreciated by people.

Only early 21st century's women-centered movies are selected, which have raised the problems and sufferings of widowhood. These issues of women are more important in this study rather than the entertainment. In these movies, light is thrown on the different problems of widow women, their exploitation and their experience of discrimination. Many laws are formulated for the improvement of condition and status of women. 'Women are relegated to subordinate position that has made them more vulnerable to abuse and less able to protect them from discrimination'(Dhawal & Chauhan 213). Still, women are unaware about their rights and laws which protect them from exploitation and to treat them equally as men.

These selected movies have not been the blockbuster hit, neither of these is popularly viewed but these films are upbringing the sufferings of widowhood in front of the public through cinema.

The study is aimed to reveal the female subjugation. Women are always obliged to accept the roles and rules formulated by patriarchal society. Females are confined to the boundaries which are constructed by men. Patriarchs hold the ultimate decision-making power. This study exposes how patriarchal society imposes abuses and ills on the women.

Methodology: Third Feminist movement was at its peak when the selected movies were released. At that time women's rights and exploitation was a part of the social conversation. Women were demanding the equality of opportunity. Feminism generally means a movement to achieve equality in all the spheres of life. It aims to achieve the goal of legal protection against the exploitation in cultural, social, political, economic and educational fields of life. On humanitarian grounds, it is targeted for all around the development of women. Feminism deals with the issues of gender differences and exploitation which are based on the theories of equalization of human beings. Feminists play and have played with a range of choices in the process of self- presentation, registering a relation to the body and to the social meaning of womanhood (Delmer 8). 'Feminism is thus a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding an amelioration in their social position' (Freedman 3). These films are analysed and viewed according to the existing literature to feminism. All the dialogues are noted down and important dialogues are sorted out from the feminist perspective. These dialogues are translated from Hindi to English. These dialogues are related to issues of feminism and their actual presentation. The dialogues of these selected movies are analysed through critical discourse analysis. It is method of evaluation of language of members of a speech community in its social and cultural context. It aids to interpret and understand the language. It examines the language form and language code. It helps for the decoding of language to provide insight into the feminist discourse. The researcher analyzed the language of the selected Hindi feminist movies with the purpose to deconstruct the dialogues to find out the hidden ideologies in these movies. With the help of this method, it is tried to uncover the constructs of patriarchy

Interpretation and Discussion: A widow is one who has lost her life partner. Husband and wife are called the better halves of each other. Wife is known as 'ardhangini' of a man. When one half is lost, life becomes hell for the second half, especially for a woman. As per estimates of Loomba Foundation, in India, there were 46,457,516 widows in India in 2015 (The Loomba Foundation 2015).

In a country like India, the condition of women becomes worse because of rituals after the death of her husband. In this research, the issue of widowhood is brought to notice to show the sufferings of a widow. A woman always thinks herself incomplete without a man. It is the most lovable relation of one's life. The loss of the most loved family member is unbearable. But the sufferings of a widow do not end only in despair rather most of the time she is ostracized by society in security and economic concerns.

The movie 'Water' is based on the issue of sufferings of widows during the period of 1938. Still in India, the widows are suffering from great difficulties. Conditions can be better but status is not much improved. Still, widow is seen in terms of ill-fate. All the tokens and symbols of marriage like vermilion, mangalasutra, bangles are all taken off from her immediately after the death of her husband. Some Orthodox and traditional Hindu families shave the head of a widow. She is given white coloured clothes to wear. It is an archetype image of a widow in India. 'With respect to mourning rituals within Hindu culture, although it has been noted that there were certain taboos widows had to abide by' (Bhana 57). Mostly a widow is sent back to her parents' house for safety concerns but some poor families take them as an extra economic burden on family and she is preferred to send to a widow ashram. In some orthodox families, widows are not allowed to remarry. Sometimes a widow is not accepted respectfully by society. She is considered as a jinxed. It becomes difficult to find a suitable match for a widow. The whole movie revolves around the atrocities of society upon a widow by finding favour with religion. Powerful patriarchs start to interpret the religious scriptures in their own way. It is quoted in the very beginning of the movie that "A widow should be long-suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal." (The Laws of Manu, chapter 5 verse 156-161, Dharamshastras, sacred Hindu Texts)

In this movie the Pandit also explains the religious instructions for a widow. He says-

“In Shastras there are three ways for a widow. One is to become a sati. Second is to remarry the brother of the deceased, if family members allow and third is to abdicate the worldly affairs and pursuits.” (Water, 2005)

In this movie, when Narayan wants to marry a widow, another reference of religion is given by Narayan's father Seth Dwarka Nath in his own patriarchal interpretation-

"Don't marry her, concubine her. A Brahmin can sleep with whom he wants. It is efficacy of a woman only." (ibid)

He advises his son not to marry a widow but to keep her as a concubine.

Even Madhumati gives an explanation of Shastras in the context of suffering and abnegation of widows-

"It is written over there in the Shastras that woman is the second half of the man when he is alive and after his death, the wife is also half dead. So how a widow can suffer?" (ibid)

Here it means that a widow is already half dead so it does not matter for rest of the sufferings of her. She has no identity of her own without a man.

An inhuman treatment is given to widow in the context of Shastras that a widow has no life of her own after the death of her husband. Widows are facing many challenges in Indian society. The most unruffled is their economic problems. In movie 'Chandini Bar', Mumtaz, being a widow of Potia, goes to take help from her husband's known ones. But they rebuke and offer her for prostitution. Because of the economic crisis, she again starts to work as a beer bar dancer. It helps her to start her life again and to foster her children. But when there is an acute economic crisis to collect a huge sum of money for the release of her son from police custody. She is forced by this situation to again go for prostitution. 'Widows in India not only suffer from social and economic sanctions but also face many psychological consequences, loneliness and in many cases deprivation causing emotional disturbances and imbalance' (Varma 132).

Same kind of crisis is faced by Kalyani in the movie 'Water'. She works as a prostitute because of the economic hardships of a widow ashram. She is forced into prostitution by Madhumati, the head of the ashram, she says to Kalyani –

"You should take care of yourself. You are a diamond of this ashram. If you are then your connoisseur are. If they are, then we are." (ibid)

Here, Madhumati is convincing Kalyani to take care of her beauty. With her beauty she would be in the demand for prostitution. With her earned money, the ashramites are surviving. But the other widows are not allowed to look beautiful. To wear colourful clothes and to have hair on their head is forbidden. Otherwise they could attract the males towards them. They are asked for self- abnegation. In this movie, the heads of all the other widows are shaved except Kalyani's. Only she is allowed to look attractive for the prostitution purposes. Madhumati gives her own interpretation of Shastras for her selfish purposes. For her own benefits she sends Kalyani for prostitution but when she expresses her desire of marriage. She says-

"Who will marry a widow? It is a sin. We are leading the life of renunciation and also die for the same."(ibid)

Here is an archetype image of a widow is given. The ideal image of widow contradicts the fulfillment of love because love's desire is intimacy and passion which is forbidden to a widow. Widow is supposed to live the life of self renunciation. It is an irony that when Madhumati wants to send Kalyani for prostitution to earn money then she asks her to maintain her beauty but when Kalyani wants to marry Madhumati starts interpreting the religious scriptures to suggest her to follow the life of renunciation to lead the life of renunciation. When she revolts Madhumati trims her hair. The different rules of Madhumati for different purposes make Kalki a rebellion and she asks to Madhumati-

"Why am I being sent for prostitution beyond the stream?"(ibid)

Kalyani raises a question on hypocritical society and Madhumati's response is also heart-rending. She says –*"To be alive."*

In this context, Maya Majumdar also quoted the statement of Rao and Rao, "Child marriages and social discouragement of re-marriage of young widows have greatly helped in the recruitment of prostitutes from village in India. Caste inequality and sex exploitation by the economically well off castes are other factors" (Majumdar 65).

When Kalyani comes to know that her own would be father- in- law is her customer, she realizes that he would not accept her as his daughter- in- law. She comes back to the ashram but Madhumati again advises her to go for prostitution. She is in the excruciating situation. This unbearable suffering ends with her suicide.

Madhumati is so heartless that she sends Chuhiya, an eight years old widow for prostitution instead of Kalyani by tempting her to eat ' Halwa poori'. As in ashram, no widow is allowed to eat sweets. But one who favours the patriarch of society, she might be allowed. With this temptation of eating a sweet dish, she is befooled by Madhumati. Even she becomes the victim of the lust of a rich and an old man.

It can also be seen in Indian society that a widow is considered as hapless being of the society. Even her shadow is considered ill omen which abandoned the widow in the mainstream society. It is seen in ' Water' movie that when Pandit is performing marriage rituals and Shukuntala goes there to take water. Pandit says annoyingly-

"Be careful, your shadow shouldn't cast over the couple."(Water, 2005).

Widows are stigmatized as having ill fate and even her shadow is considered inauspicious. 'Widows are often regarded as having the "evil eye" and many abandoned at temples where they have to eke out a beggar's life' (Brewer 13). Actually, it is not thought well in terms of taking part in shagun ceremonies even in a widow's own son and daughter's marriage. In this context, Maya Majumdar reveals that 'association of inauspiciousness with widowhood still continues. Widows themselves avoid taking an active part in ceremonial occasions' (Majumdar 125).

This movie shows that widows are leading the life of renunciation and abjuration with the wish to be a man in the incarnation. After the death of widow Bhua in the ashram, Shakuntala says-

"By the Will of God, she will incarnate as a man." (Water, 2005)

There are different rules and regulations for the same situation and same matter for men and women. In this movie, there is an irony on patriarchal society when Chuhiya asks-

"Where is the widower house of men?" (ibid)

Here she puts a question on the hypocritical society. She wants to know that why a man is not sent to a widower house after to death of his wife. It is only women who suffer because of widowhood. 'Entering to widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliating to women than to a widower because of the discrimination, ritual sanctions of the society against the widows' (Varma 132).

Narayan also asks her friend to imagine the situation of being a widower by saying –

"Suppose you have a wife and she is dead and everything is snatched from you."(ibid)

Actually, he is making his friend realize about the sufferings of women. It shows that there is an inequality of treatment given to women in Indian society as there are biases and partiality even in the religious norms.

In our Indian society, men do not live in abstemiousness and restrictions. Another bitter reality of our society is that a widow is not easily accepted by the society. It is also clear through the conversation of Shakuntala and Pandit that widows do not know about the laws and rights and if they know about their rights, they are not aware of them.

When Kalyani and Narayan go for a visit to the western people's area of town, their western women seem to them happy and nicely dressed wearing coloured clothes. By seeing them, Kalyani asks Narayan-

"Is there no widow in them?" (ibid)

Narayan remarks on the statement of Kalyani-

"Widows might be there but they are not like our widows." (ibid)

Here, he wants to say that the condition of Indian widows is worse than the widows of other countries. The whole conversation shows that the interpretation of Shastras is done differently by powerful elites according to their own selfish motives. The status and position of Indian widows are pitiable. A woman is a beautiful creation of God but most of the societies offer a misconception of male superiority. Every society and culture follows religion from birth to death. The different religions represent the different roles and position of women in a family. Almost, all the religious sculptures are written by men. So, most of them favour men only. There are complicated views on the status and position of women because paradoxical statements are given in many religious scriptures. But some of the scriptures have described women's status equal to men, as it is inscribed in 'Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji' - "So Kyon Manda Aakhiye Jit Jame Rajan" (SGGS 473). It means that why to call her inferior, from her the Kings are born. Shri Guru Granth Sahib has elevated the position of a woman by saying so in the context of her status. So a human being should not suffer for gender differences.

Conclusion: The whole discussion shows that widow women are helpless creatures in the society where heinously oppressive acts are used to restrict the individuality of a widow. The intense trepidation of male domination makes them deprived of their self-identity. Widows suffer from acute economic crisis which forced them to go for prostitution. They are exploited by patriarchal society for their selfish motives and even religious interpretations are made according to powerful patriarchs of the society. Women are considered inauspicious in a society.

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