

Toxic masculinity, encroaching the boundaries of Female Body? A Critique of the Subversion of Gender Politics in Select Cinematic Texts.

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This research work of mine proposes to embark upon the study of the ways by which the gender stereotyping paves way for the toxic masculinity to encroach the boundaries of female body, casting focus on the attempts made by the contemporary movies such as Thappad (2020) directed by Anubhav Sinha and Chhapaak (2020) directed by Meghna Gulzar, to subvert and deconstruct the canonical versions of the hegemonic patriarchal traditions. Through the evolvment of Amrita (Taapsee Pannu) and Malti (Deepika Padukone) out of the confinements of patriarchy, the study demands the need of an evolution of the feminine selves, which indeed becomes a revolution in the human perceptions regarding gender as a mere social construct and not as an inherited, biological element. The study focuses on the reconstruction of the predetermined fallacies in the domain of gender politics aiming at keeping the creators of the gender tradition, where subsiding woman as the “other” is the “normal”, at bay. The thesis casts its focus on the objectification of female body under the so called “subject”, the man. It also focuses on the evolution of the feminine self as “the one” and not “the other”, through select cinematic texts.

Keywords: Gender, Cinema, Toxic- masculinity, Female Body, Patriarchy, Subversion.

Introduction

Cinema, which occupies one of the pivotal roles among the media products consumed by the different strata of the society, plays a significant role in organizing the norms, do s and don't s, altering the entire outlook and perspective of the society. With the development of science and technology, there happened to be a drastic and dramatic change in the way in which the society perceived different aspects around. In addition, the empathetic approach of Cinema, the mirror to the society that reflects the realities of life, started shaping and structuring the minds of its

consumers. Indian Cinema, which was once the domain of male centered chauvinistic movies which interpreted various social institutions such as caste, marriage, family structure, tradition and so on as the key elements of male dominance, has now given way to eminent film makers who wish upon an egalitarian society where man and woman are treated the same. As a result, the macho heroes started to be replaced by “sheroes” of unbending will power and unending perseverance and determination and thereby putting an end to the “othering” of women.

The movie *Thappad* directed by Anubhav Sinha is one of the best examples of such genre of movies which had completely deconstructed the stereotypical, confining notions of womanhood. The movie is a journey through the life of the central character Amrita (Taapsee Pannu), who gave up all her aspirations and confined herself in a pseudo, happy married life with her husband Vikram (Pavail Gulatti). Amrita, a girl with lot many talents yet trapped in a confined institution of marriage, is a character who is universal in nature. The central incident of the movie “a slap”, is what that made her analyse all the unfair things which had been going around her for so long which she once believed to be the most beautiful experiences. The movie picturises the drastic transition of Amrita from the submissive, “well behaved” ignorant puppet like woman, to a woman who demands the self respect she deserves and an independent space for exploring her own world. This is a slap on the face of the typical concept of binary opposition between the man and the woman. The movie deals with not only the lives of Amrita, but also the lives of Netra (Maya Sarao) her lawyer, a bold and successful lawyer who strives for the rights of women, but is in a clash with her own feminine self and Sunita (Geetika Vidya Ohlyan) her maid, a victim of domestic violence, who is not even aware about her own rights and individuality as a woman. The movie offers an in-depth depiction of the preconceived notions regarding the criteria with which a woman should behave and evokes questions within the minds of the spectators regarding the identification of the manipulator of the invisible yet existing, unwritten laws concerning gender and the possibilities of exchanging the gender roles.

The movie *Chhapaak*, directed by Meghna Gulzar, centred around an acid attack survivor, Malti (Deepika Padukone), portrays a shocking realisation regarding the sense of toxic power man holds to encroach the boundaries of a woman’s body, the importance of physicality attributed to a woman, by the society with respect to her gender and moreover the way a woman redefines her destiny with utmost perseverance and courage. The toxic masculine power which casts the sole focus on the female body, as a mere object providing sexual satisfaction and as a medium to seek his toxic revenge is portrayed through the acid attack in the movie, where the

villain tries to target her body, to seek his revenge. This can be paralleled in another way in *Thappad*, where Amrita's husband, chooses to release his frustrations and agonies on Amrita's body with a slap. *Chhapaak* strongly voices for the need of exchange of gender roles through subtle scenes, where the husband of Archana Bajaj (Malti's lawyer) takes over the charge of domestic chores himself, which is often considered to be a deviation from the "normal". The movie is a battle against the sexist ideologies, power structures and gender politics of the present pseudo-liberal society. It also portrays how a woman's physicality is strongly bounded with her identity and future, as portrayed in the movie, where Malti is denied all her opportunities as well as a career of her dreams, solely because of her deformed face. The movie counterparts the Ecriture Feminine writing in Literature which demanded the women writers of the time to write about and celebrate their bodies as well as sexuality. The movie makes the "shero" raise her head up, throw out the piece of cloth with which she once masked her burnt face and to be confident in what she is. The threads of linkage between a woman's identity and her body (physicality), loses its connection.

The movies offer a deconstructive reading of the pre-existed texts which represented women as mere sexual objects who are supposed to mute themselves, facing all the atrocities of patriarchy. The movies voice against the accepted binary opposition between man and woman, a notion which was strongly opposed by Derrida, as it always resulted in the superiority of one and inferiority of the other. The phallogocentric approach of the film makers is demolished in these movies where the heroines are raised to a higher pedestal and their aspirations, thoughts and frustrations are brought to the forefront from the periphery. The centrality of the centre (man) is lost and the movies leave the spectators with a message that an egalitarian society on the grounds of gender is never an Utopian fancy if the women themselves are determined enough to pursue their aspirations without compromising their identity.

Review of Literature

The Sexual Politics, by Kate Millett, expressed the author's great contempt for the socio-political institution; patriarchy, which manipulates the societal norms to create a feeling of inferiority within the minds of women so as to subject themselves as submissive, inferior creatures. The text voiced against the trend of authors to re-establish the misogynistic attitude through Literature. The detailed analysis of this work offers an in-depth perception regarding gender as a socio-political construct and not as an inherited biological entity.

The Female Eunuch, an account on the sexual repression of women by Germaine Greer, accounts how this sexist repression rendered women the roles of mere eunuchs, without any say and space in the society. She stood for the fact that sex roles were social constructions and not biological parameters. The text divided into four core chapters: Body, Soul, Love and Hate, strongly advocated for women revolution and liberty to all. The work is a great aid in the proper understanding of the ways in which the society “castrated” women, imparting them the attributions of a eunuch.

Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution by Adrienne Rich, demonstrates motherhood and domestic roles of a woman as limiting forces or agents insisting them to stick on to their nurturing roles as mothers and not as individuals. The thorough reading of the text facilitates the reading public to understand motherhood as a patriarchal definition and not as an inherent role.

Objectives of Research

To challenge the preconceived and predetermined pseudo fallacies regarding gender. A close analysis of *Thappad* and *Chhapaak* aids us indeed to analyse gender as a social construct and also to differentiate between the often “misused” terms; “sex” and “gender”.

To break away the connecting links between toxic masculinity and objectification of female body and thereby attribute the position of a subject and not an object. This aims to put an end to the binary opposition between man and the woman and thereby demands for gender justice. An understanding of the need of the exchange of gender roles and the development of innovative perception which enables “gender” to be a fluid entity rather than a tightly-compact structure, will definitely aid the upliftment of women.

To develop a broad as well as in-depth knowledge in the domain of gender studies and to reconceptualise the gender stereotypes through select cinematic texts, providing a deconstructive reading of the same.

Research Questions

Who determined the notions of gender; the unique notions which are solely attributed to a particular gender? One is born into a particular sex and the sex of a person is completely beyond his/her decision or opinion. Then how come this single aspect (sex of a person) can control him/her all through the rest of their lives? Is it justifiable to expect a person should behave in

a particular way, solely because he/she belongs to a particular gender? In this context, up to what extent, the movie is successful enough to provide a deconstructive reading of the concept of “gender”? How do the movies *Thappad* and *Chhapaak* stand apart from the cliché trends of other women oriented movies of the time?

Who created the idea of “normal” that states man is the subject and woman the object or the other? How toxic masculinity gained courage to encroach the boundaries of female body? What limits a woman from being at a higher pedestal; her sex or her gender?

Feminism, Post Feminism, Queer studies and a wide variety of streams concerning gender studies have already taken over the domain of gender and sexuality and hence today’s era is a highly evolved scenario. But did this evolvement really happen? Or this nation still follows the barbaric conventions of a misogynistic culture? Will this culture, in future demand the horrific shift from Gauri to Kali; the goddess of creation to the demon of destruction?

Research Methodology

This research will be a study of the manipulations of gender politics and the contemporary Indian film industry’s attempts to subvert and reconceptualise the already existing concepts regarding gender and gender stereotypes, through studies on select cinematic texts.

The research work will be done as a set of inquiries. The initial inquiry will be made into the patriarchal implementations of several pseudo, preconceived gender notions and the influence of the often misunderstood terms; “sex” and “gender” over gender politics. Secondly, the inquiry will be made into the existing gender roles of the scenario as well as the reconceptualization of gender stereotypes and the baseless foundations upon which patriarchy tries to confine women within the walls of the house. Here the areas of “body” and “gender” will be studied for its complementary nature and analyses the socio-political as well as cultural relevance they possess. Thirdly, the objectification of the female body and male hegemony are inquired into. Next inquiry is the basis upon which the entire thesis will be focused; the attempts of the contemporary Indian Cinema to subvert the patriarchal and sexist ideologies so as to envision a society free from the shackles of gender injustice.

In this study, I aim to make maximum possible employment of all the available sources related to the studies concerning gender. Conversing with a group of women belonging to different strata of the society, will give insights regarding the diversities in the problems faced by women

belonging to various classes of the society. Print and web materials will help and will be aids in understanding the scope of this research area and the potential of the topic to revolutionize the current society's beliefs and thought patterns, providing a utilitarian mission to the research work.

Relevance of the Topic

A research thesis could find meaning in its entirety only when it achieves a utilitarian goal; either by being beneficial to an entire society or at least to a large group of people. This thesis as focuses on the subtle nuances of gender and its wide spectra of elements, could serve as a socio-cultural and political document of the milieu and encompasses a wide range of ideas which can revolutionize the world which is in a dilemma. Gender studies is a wide multi-disciplinary genre which embodies a large number of branches of knowledge such as literature, psychology, sociology and so on. Can efficiently pave way to the waves of radical changes in the present scenario. In the society, which yearns for a new perception to feel the unfelt and to see the unseen, the thesis focusing on the nuances of gender, body, gender stereotypes and the ways in which patriarchy stereotypes the world, is of high relevance. The study will also be an awakening call to the society, which still belongs to the barbaric conventions of the past, to lift itself from the abyss of darkness.

Conclusion

Cinema, like Literature and all other art forms has a strong influence and impact over the spectators' psyche. Each and every art form is a depiction of the social, psychological, cultural lives of the population. The drastic change in the portrayal of women in movies as iron willed "sheroes" have changed the attitude towards women in the recent times and has successfully resulted in the deconstruction of the past portrayals of woman as the secondary sex. Many eminent film makers in India have attempted to redefine the social course of history focusing on the aspects of gender, especially female subjectivity, because of the intersectionality of gender with race, class, economy and so on. The selected movies *Thappad* and *Chhapaak* offer a deconstructive reading where the patriarchal society gets slapped on the face by courageous women protagonists. The very base of the Indian culture, the great epics, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* are highly misogynistic and it takes a huge effort from our part to revise the very same versions of patriarchal thoughts and at the same time is never an unattainable

dream. The thesis strongly aims to make this hard-to-crack nut of change in gender politics possible through intense research so as to mould a society free from gender inequality.

The literary works that I have gone through regarding my research topic, both print and online, are all comprehensive records. They all were immense aids to have deep insights into the subtle nuances of gender and a drastic shift in the portrayal of women in Indian Cinema. Through my intense reading, I was able to have an in-depth idea regarding femininity and gender, the present state of the same in the society and was able to foresee the chances of increasing scope and relevance of the area as a socio-cultural domain.

In the light of the knowledge they have given me, I plan to pursue my research, to embark upon the detailed study of the wide possibilities of gender and female body, the attempts in Indian Cinema to alter the perceptions towards femininity, emphasizing on the need to eradicate the misconceptions of patriarchy and so on. A study of this sort, I also take as an opportunity to know more of the conditions- social, cultural and political- that constitute the past as well as the present Indian nation. The intense knowledge of the past, when analyzed in the light of the present, I believe will result in the moulding of an egalitarian society free from the male-dominant misconceptions, an aim, I hope will be made much easier to attain, with my intensive research work.

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