

# Subjugation of Women

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**Abstract-** This paper explores the multifaceted subjugation of women in Indian society as depicted and perpetuated by the Indian film industry. Historically, Indian cinema has served as both a mirror to societal norms and a formidable instrument of cultural conditioning. This study analyses the representation of women across various eras of Indian filmmaking, from the “Golden Age” to contemporary regional and Hindi cinema.

The research highlights how traditional narratives have often reinforced patriarchal structures by glorifying the ideals of the *Sati-Savitri*—the self-sacrificing, submissive wife and mother—while vilifying or objectifying women who deviate from these roles. Special emphasis is placed on the “male gaze” prevalent in commercial cinema, where women are frequently reduced to aesthetic props or victims requiring male salvation, thereby normalizing gender-based violence and systemic inequality.

Conversely, the paper also examines the recent paradigm shift led by “parallel cinema” and the emergence of female-centric narratives that challenge these archaic stereotypes. By deconstructing key films that address issues such as dowry, domestic violence and sexual autonomy, this abstract argues that while Indian movies have historically contributed to the subjugation of women, they currently possess the evolving potential to act as a catalyst for feminist discourse and social reform. The conclusion suggests that the future of gender equality in India is inextricably linked to the responsible evolution of its cinematic storytelling.

**Keywords:** *Indian Cinema, Gender Inequality, Patriarchy, Objectification, Bollywood, Social Reform.*

The term ‘GENDER’ when talked about we often make a mistake of equating Gender and Sex as the same thing. But there is difference between the two, sex is something which is given, it is biological. Nature has made the division between men and women in terms of physical and natural attributes. It is the category which is controlled by nature. Gender on the other hand is socially and culturally constructed by external factors. Gender includes male and female, both masculinity and femininity. It is relative and not absolute in nature, it is characterised by particular culture of a society. It is

related to human agency. It is humanly constructed. “Gender” is now one of the busiest, most restless term in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seems to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning. Gender is a much contested concept as slippery as it is indispensable, but a site of unease rather than of agreement.<sup>(1)</sup>

Daily we hear that how men and women are different. It is said that they have different brain chemistries, different brain organization and different hormones. It is also said that their different anatomies lead to different destinies. Further it is said that they have different ways of knowing, listening to different moral values and have different ways of speaking and hearing each other. The pop psychologist John Gray informs us that not only do women and men communicate differently, but they also “think, feel, perceive, react, respond, love, need and appreciate differently.” It is a miracle of cosmic proportions that they ever understand one another. Despite this alleged interplanetary differences both men and women do share each and every sphere of their life together. Gender is not simply a system of classification by which biological males and females are sorted, separated and socialised into equivalent sex roles, gender also expresses the universal inequality between women and men. When we talk about gender we also speak about hierarchy, power and inequality not simply difference.<sup>(2)</sup> The term “GENDER” is by no means value neutral for it not only implies the distinction between femininity and masculinity, it is also an essential terminological indicator of the unequal relationship between woman and man and the social subjugation of the former. Thus the political overtones of gender are very substantive.<sup>(3)</sup>

We see that in every society the position of the women is neglected, they remain under the domination of the male members of the society. The language we speak is also gendered in the real sense of the term like the term “MAN” as used in the English language does not always stand for specific

a sex, it more often implies the humanity as a whole. In other words the term MAN at one hand it is specific on the other hand it is universal. Woman has a very limited definition, it is always denoted as the other of man and also it is never used to denote the humanity as a whole. In number of South Asian languages the terms such as 'SWAMI', 'PATI' and 'MALIK' that are used to denote the husband also mean master.<sup>(4)</sup>

From time immemorial women have been deprived of their social position and status in the society. It has been closely fitted in the minds of all the individuals that men are superior to the women. In every sphere of life the male members dominated the life of the female members. The women are being constantly being exploited by the male counterparts. In the Indian society we constantly come across the view that a boy child is more desirable than a girl child. There have been instances where in desire of a male child a family constantly pressurizes a woman to give birth to a male child and if she fails to do that then she is either given divorce by her husband and the husband again marries another woman and the first wife is either treated as a servant in the house or she may be thrown out of the house. In every sphere of life women are guided, dictated and are ruled by the men members of the society. In the Indian society child marriage, female infanticide, sati, dowry systems played and still some of them continues to play a significant and a crucial role.

It is also important to note that the woman from the ancient period was deprived of their own status in the society. In all the earlier religious text it depicts the woman not only as an inferior creature but also as an auspicious one. In the two epics RANAYANA and MAHABHARATA the position of the women was always portrayed as subservient to the male. In RAMAYANA, Sita was wrongfully suspected and insulted with cutting words in public and Rama's unprotesting silence consigned her to the flames and was mercilessly deceived and banished to the forest. In MAHABHARATA, we come across instances of physical and mental cruelty to women, the cruellest incident being the public insult of Draupadi in Dhritarastra's court where she was ordered to be paraded naked in presence of her husband's- the Pandava. The epic is full of instances where we come across incidents where the women had been treated as a means of pleasure by the men. In those stories rape and violence to women was often a retaliatory custom among men.<sup>(5)</sup>

"Since the inception of human civilization the most oppressed people in the world history had been Shudras in India, slaves in the west and women all over."<sup>(6)</sup> In our society from the very birth we find discrimination being inferred between a girl child and a male child. "Men are viewed as rational, independent and emotionally strong while women are seen as caring, nurturing, emotional and vulnerable. Men have gained primacy in the public domain as heads of households, associated with bread winning and shouldering family responsibilities whereas women are linked to activities like child rearing and to look after the welfare of the family."<sup>(7)</sup> We thus see that the position of the women in the society has been very limited from the early periods till today.

The deplorable condition of the women is seen in each and every sphere of life. The entertainment world sometimes projects the harsh realities of the world thus now we can concentrate on a particular movie which shows us the reality regarding the position of the women in the society. The film "*Matrubhoomi - A nation without women*" explores the impact of absence of women on men. The instability, which can creep into a society due to the absence of women - be it physical, emotional and psychological - is the main theme of the film. It underlines how the absence of women inexorably leads to the debasement of men, draining them of all that makes them human. The film explores a futuristic rural India wherein due to rampant female infanticide, women are practically extinct. The impact of the absence of women on men sees them finding alternative sources of release - pornography, homosexuality, bestial violence. When a girl is actually spied, she is promptly sold and married to five brothers. All five and the father-in-law exercise their conjugal rights in turn. She starts coming closer to the youngest brother, the only one who treats her as a human being much to the chagrin of the father and other brothers. The eldest brother has the youngest one killed. She turns to her father for refuge but the father blinded with money too lets her down. After her attempt to escape with the low caste family servant boy unwittingly triggers off a caste war, she is clapped in iron chains in a cowshed and raped repeatedly by her family and the low castes as well. When she finally becomes pregnant, everyone claims paternity. In the throes of the devastating caste war that ensues over her, she gives birth to a girl. The film explores an India of the future, when women are an increasingly scarce species. Though

futuristic, the milieu, the humour, the plot and characters are based in a contemporary set-up in order to highlight the magnitude of the problem and make it more real and imminent than a distantly fairy tale. The film is an ode to the beauty and power of women and the chaos that can ensue due to their physical or emotional absence in a society.<sup>(8)</sup>

The film was shot on a tight budget of Rs. 2 crore, in Renai, a remote village in Harda district of Madhya Pradesh in 29 days. The cast included actors from Delhi theatre circuit, Sushant Singh, Aditya Shrivastav, Piyush Mishra and Deepak Bandhu and the lead actress was played by Tulip Joshi. The director of the movie was Pankaj Jha and the producers were Patrick Sobelman, Punkej Kharbanda. The release date of the movie was 08 Jul 2005. After running through the festival circuit, including the 2003 Venice Film Festival, 2003 Toronto International Film Festival, the film was commercially released two years later on July 8, 2005, with 150 prints. It was dubbed into six languages, including Tamil, Telugu, Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Bengali and French, to reach a wider audience.<sup>(9)</sup>

As per film director, Manish Jha, he said that he wanted to examine the emotional and psychological impact of a society without women. It is a very extreme situation to be imagined, a whole nation without women. "The central character Kalki (played by tulip joshi) being married to five brothers is analogous to Queen Draupadi being married to the Pandava brothers in *Mahabharata* and Kalki references to the forecast of Vishnu's tenth incarnation, Kalki, who would end the Kaliyuga"<sup>(10)</sup>. The producer in an interview to the "THE HINDU" newspaper said, "We are all aware today that tigers are getting extinct. I don't think we are aware that the same thing is happening to our women". He further said that the movie acted like a wakeup call and according to him the wakeup call should be loud or nobody hears it properly.<sup>(11)</sup> The movie acted as an eye opener to project the position of the women in the society.

In a male dominated society women are predominantly imagined as consumer items, women's sexuality is never recognized except where it is employed to the service of male gratification. A women's sexuality is controlled and manipulated through conjuncture of familial and cultural ideals which set the norms of her dress, her way of talking, the limit and nature of her movement.<sup>(12)</sup> In early times and even today we do find illegal practices to

detect the 'sex' of the baby before birth. If it is found out that the baby in the mother womb is girl child and if the family demands desperately of a male child then by various means the child in the mother womb is killed. Recently in a serial shown in the channel called COLOURS VIACOM, the name of the daily soap is "NA AANA IS DES LADO" the cast includes Meghna Malik (Ammaji), Natasha Sharma (Sia), Aditya Reddies (Raghav Singh Sangwan) and others. The drama show raises the issue of the prevalent preferential treatment of male children in vast swaths of India. Female infanticide is a real occurrence in India even today and recent introduction of sonogram machines has only made matters worse, in spite of a legal ban on usage of information on the sex of the baby before birth. Even educated professional people are known to participate in this evil practice with doctors who do it for money. The caption of the serial is "No girl should be born in the village" and the story revolves around the zero-tolerance policy for girl children in the village and a young lady doctor's fight against the resultant homicide crimes being committed.<sup>(13)</sup>

There are many such daily soaps which actually brings out the real picture of the Indian society at large. In another daily soap which is shown in the channel COLOURS VIACOM, "BALIKA VADHU- KACHE UMAR K PAKKE RISHTHEY" it shows how an eight year old girl has been married. She has to stop her education, leave her parents and go and live with her in-laws. Through this serial we see how child marriage ruins the life and dream of small little girl, but on the other hand the boy with whom she gets married continues with his studies and fulfil his dreams.

It is not only through these, that we get to see a deplorable condition of the women in the society, in the present situation there are movies, daily soaps, advertisements are being made which shows that women enjoys a low status in the society. It is already borne into the minds of every individual that women are incomplete without men. There is no such field where women are self-sufficient except for the household works and bearing and rearing of children. The culture of our Indian society has been shaped in a way where each one of us from the very beginning start to think in a very different way. Like it is believed that a girl child will always play with toys, utensils and many other things which are indirectly related to household work, their games are always essentially indoor games. But on the other hand a male child is more inclined towards games

like cricket, football, tennis, badminton in short outdoor games. They are more inclined towards toys which are essentially cars, trains, aeroplanes and motorbikes. In watching television even the women essentially watches shows related to family problems, cooking and shows which are much more related to the daily household works. But on the other hand men always prefer to watch games, news and shows which are science fiction or which consists violence and fighting. Women have always been projected, portrayed as inferior to the male counterparts of the society.

As time has passed the sufferings on the women has went on increasing from time to time. They have been subjected to exploitation by the male members of the society. It has been repeatedly pointed out that women are the other of men, signifying the fact that the women herself does not have any self-identity. From time to time it has been pointed out that the “woman is that which the man is not”. Woman is made to understand that she cannot exist on her own. In the Vedic Age women enjoyed a relatively high position in the society. They enjoyed freedom for spiritual progress and intellectual development. But this status deteriorated when the injunctions of Manu codified Hindu life and propounded the theory of perpetual tutelage of women. Buddhism tried to restore the position of women in social life and opened avenues for their social cultural attainments. During the period of Islam and Mughal rule, the position of women slumped. It touched the lowest ebb during the British rule. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that serious efforts were made by social reformers to give women an honourable position in the society.<sup>(14)</sup>

Standing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we see that in today's world the position of the women is changing to a certain extent. Women are becoming conscious of their own positions and status, increasingly they are trying hard to give a tough competition to the male counterparts of the society. Women's who earlier remained confined only in the house, now have come out and have made an attempt to participate in the world outside the HOUSE. Now women are allowed proper education, they are allowed to take part in the political process of the country. A girl child born to a parent is given similar kind of love and affection as given to the male child.

*THE PRINCIPLE WHICH REGULATES THE EXISTING SOCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO SEXES- THE LEGAL SUBORDINATION OF*

*ONE SEX TO THE OTHER- IS WRONG IN ITSELF And NOW ONE OF THE CHIEF HINDRANCES TO HUMAN IMPROVEMENT; AND ... IT OUGHT TO BE REPLACED BY A PRINCIPLE OF PERFECT EQUALITY, ADMITTING NO POWER OR PRIVILEGE ON THE ONE SIDE, NOR DISABILITY ON THE OTHER. – JOHN STUART MILL ; THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN (1869)<sup>(15)</sup>*

By this it is meant that there should be no difference created between the man and the women. The position of the women should be secured in the society. Moreover we, very easily create a distinction between the attributes of men and women. We practically forget the primary thing that both men and women are first of all human beings. The gender difference plays a major role in creating our perception. What is more important is we should concentrate on the fact that gender inequality should be eradicated from the society in order to achieve a harmonious relation between man and woman. One thing should be strictly borne in mind that both men and women are incomplete without each other. Both men and women compliment as well as supplements each other. The disadvantaged position of the large majority of women came to be formally acknowledged only after independence. Many changes have taken place since the five decades of independence. Women have learnt new skills, entered new fields of employment, gained better education and increased their knowledge base.<sup>(16)</sup>

Feminism is major challenge which has contest the peculiar gender construction of women. Feminism is a theory, approach, it is a theoretical, philosophical, ideological and conceptual understanding how women should be viewed in the society. It works for how women will find her identity in the society. Feminism has played a major role in securing a identity for the women in the society. The feminism has constantly played a crucial role in the society trying to secure a distinct identity of the women in the society. It rejects all such ideas and notions which emphasize the men as the superior creature on earth. It strictly focuses on the empowerment of the women in every sphere of life.

Thus we can say women in order to enjoy an equal status in the society along with the male members of the society they should be aware of their rights and freedoms. They should be aware of what legal rights have been provided to them, unless they are aware of it there won't occur any change in their deplorable conditions. Women further needs to understand where power rests in the society. They should

identify it and then only they can work for their own upliftment. Further it is said that if the domination and the discrimination meted out to the women, then the women should identify where the resource is situated in the society. The social system in our society forces rigid gender definitions which has a crippling effect on women's rights and freedom. These socially constructed gender differences are the chief source of women's oppression. Growing up a female in a masculine and a patriarchal world and a culture saturated with male bias, women never set a chance to see themselves with their own eyes. What women need to understand is that they have to realise not to become a victim and to give up the old belief that "I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will be of any consequences". A woman has to stop perceiving herself as a victim and has to achieve the consciousness of her own power and potential. Women can refuse subordination and can gain transcendence from the male defined world, for this what is required is a rupture with the past. Everything from the past must be eliminated because history views woman as an object and deprives her of her rights. Men on the other hand need to perceive woman not as commodities to be possessed as wives and mothers but as persons with their own identities.

Women have begun to challenge the traditional assumptions about their roles and capabilities. There has been marked change and it has been for the better. Many of the benefits are yet to touch the majority and that is why women continue to experience various forms of gender discrimination. The most important measure of their success should be the extent to which women's are able to interpret, apply and enforce laws of their own making incorporating their own voices, values and concerns.<sup>(17)</sup> In the present situation we do find in certain fields, women equating with the male members of the society. But the question remains whether in each and every sphere, in every society can we establish an equal status of the women in regard to the male members of the society. The answer is not known, but what each one of us can do is- at least we can try not to think "WOMEN AS THE OTHER OF MEN...

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to all my professors, for their unwavering support, guidance and invaluable insights throughout this research.

Their expertise and encouragement were instrumental in the completion of this work. I am also deeply thankful to my family and friends, whose constant belief in me provided the strength and motivation needed to overcome challenges. Their patience and understanding have been a cornerstone of my success. Finally, I would like to acknowledge all the individuals and organizations that contributed to this project, directly and indirectly. Your support made this a reality. Thank you.

#### NOTES

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