A Psycho-social Perspective of Gender Role of Then and Now Leading Ladies of Hindi Cinema

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Abstract
The present paper is an attempt to understand the gender role of the leading actresses of Hindi cinema in terms of their roles showcased onscreen. The research tries to touch upon the growth chart of the role of the Hindi film female protagonist (as well as antagonist) from a psychosocial perspective of gender role stereotype. The on-screen characters have been analyzed in terms of descriptive versus prescriptive gender roles. The study also emphasizes upon the contemporary gender role of the actresses in Hindi cinema and degree of audience's acceptance of the contemporary depictions.

Keywords: Gender roles, Hindi Cinema, Stereotypes

Introduction
Understanding the role and growth of leading ladies generally referred to as the heroines of Hindi cinema in terms of their onscreen portrayal has been a common phenomenon. How these portrayals have changed over time have often been studied from sociological perspective of gender. The current research focuses on understanding the changes in onscreen female characters of Hindi cinema from a psychosocial perspective. Gender Role is a psychosocial construct which implies behavior exhibited by a gender group as per the norms of the society/culture one lives in. The concept is believed to have three components: Affective, Cognitive and Behavioral. This paper is however only restricted to the second component i.e. the cognitive component. The concept which comes in the domain of cognitive component of gender role is gender stereotype. A stereotype is a schema or a set of beliefs about a certain group of people.

Gender role stereotypes: are the features assigned to women and men on the basis of social roles that men and women hold and not on the criterion of their sex. (Helgeson, 2012). Stereotypes have descriptive and prescriptive components (Fiske & Stevens, 1993)

The descriptive aspect of stereotypes is limiting in nature, as we judge feminine women as less competent for authoritarian and power positions and masculine men as less capable of caregiving. The prescriptive component of a stereotype is related with how people should behave due to their sex. The prescriptive component of gender-role stereotypes dictate that men should be masculine and women should be feminine in presentation and mannerisms. Over time, the gender role stereotype can also be considered as ever changing in the Hindi cinema. The concept of gender role i.e. displaying gender appropriate behavior is influence by societal norms and expectations. Since cinema is the mirror to changes in cultural norms and preferences, gender role portrayals of Hindi cinema heroines have also undergone typical changes. The older school of film making clearly divided the presentation as either good or bad. (Tere, 2012). The good character was the beautiful Indian woman. The goodness was associated with descriptive features like portraying the role of a homemaker, a nurturant mother and a caring housewife. These are roles which in those times were expected from an average Indian woman and were believed to make them more feminine. Digression from these roles which would mean depiction of a character dressed in Western attire, often in the role of a notch dancer, would put the character into a ‘bad’ woman category. This dichotomy was resultant of the social norms prevalent and under practice and were strengthened with a quality of audience response, i.e. favourable and unfavourable to the good and bad portrayals respectively.

The prescriptive role of the female protagonist was to showcase moral uprightness like loyalty to husband and parents, sense of sacrifice, righteousness.(Tere, 2012). However the prescriptive role of female characters prevented them from being outspoken or demonstrating open expression of honesty or combating injustice. Such portrayals can be seen in characters played by Madhubala in Mughal e Azam or by Nargis in Mother India.

Gender role inferences about the heroines of Hindi cinema can also be understood in terms of

a. identity and function of characters depicted by them on screen.

b. screen time the character shared in the movie.

a. While the heroine-vamp (i.e. good/bad) bifurcation remained in the early cinema, the Hindi film heroines enjoyed a well-defined social status in the 70s, the status of a working woman. The school teacher, tonga rider, agricultural worker, singer, writer, lawyer and politician or empress enacted by leading mainstream heroines of those times did give heroines an identity. This trend
broke the mould of damsel in distress or helpless beautiful cinderella roles played by them in 70s. While the descriptive role (i.e. heroines should be epitome of beauty, love and self-sacrifice) remained more or less the same as in 60s, it was the prescriptive role (i.e. heroines should play home bound or housewives to be the good woman) that underwent change. (Reza, 2003). The concept of working woman emerged in a positive way in the 70s. The characters were beyond the notch dancer categories and included varied professions pursued by women in our society during those times.

b. In terms of screen time, both the 60s and 70s era were comparatively later in Hindi cinema is relatively a newer and more appreciable emergence of grey characters. Grey characters can receive appreciation and accolades for their convincing acting skills. The goodness or badness of the character, their appreciation in our society, are also showcased on screen. Masculinity or feminity depends on the character of the plot and the basis of profession pursued by the character.

Current Hindi cinema – gender role is a result of social norms and existing individualities

Contemporary Hindi cinema has undergone complete transition. Gender role of leading ladies have changed in various ways. Feminineness of the character can no longer be inferred from the kind of clothes (Indian or western) worn by the character. Masculinity or feminity depends on the character of the plot and acting skills. Today the leading ladies have a well-defined identity i.e. a full name (earlier cinema addressed the characters with unrealistic first names mostly). Also their social role i.e. working or non-working are both depicted on screen. However variety of professions which today’s Indian women pursue and for which they are appreciated in our society, are also showcased on screen. The goodness or badness of the character is no more decided upon the the basis of profession pursued by the character.

Emergence of grey characters and degree of audience appreciation

The concept of grey characters which emerged comparatively later in Hindi cinema is relatively a newer and more recent development for the Hindi film actress. Very recently, roles played by Tabu in Maqbool or in Haider or by Priyanka Chopra in Saat Khoon Maaf or Kangana Ranaut in Tanu Weds Manu II have been successful in establishing the notion that a woman is also at the end of the day a human being and cannot always be morally upright. Jealousy, hatred, irritation and other aspects of neuroticism which a woman is often naturally associated with, are often shown in Hindi films. Fortunately, the audience also has begun to take these on screen characters empathetically and normally.

However, it must be noted that while audience appreciation for grey characters played by men, the appreciation for the female antagonists is comparatively lesser. Dislike for on screen ‘femme fatale’ is because to date the Indian woman is supposed to be the creator and the caregiver. Irrespective of how justifiable the circumstances are, audience gives thumbs down for female characters on a murder spree even though the actresses receive appreciation and accolades for their convincing performance.

Shahrukh Khan’s portrayal as serial killer in Darr and Baazigar received thunderous applause in theatres. However similar audience reaction to date for a grey traited woman character cannot be expected. Hence, the prescriptive role in terms of values and ethics, remains the same for the Hindi film heroine as the social norms in a collectivist patriarchal culture like India demands a woman to be morally upright.

Although moderate diversions from the norms have been appreciated by the audience in recent times, (like the lead character willing to live a single independent life by walking out of a male dominated relationship in Hindi motion picture Queen or ambitious and career oriented Bipasha Basu in Corporate), it takes extra efforts by actors and film makers to make the character seem likeable to the audience.

Very recently movies like Dil Dhadakne Do clearly shows how even the affluent women of Indian society also have to compromise and sacrifice for the sake of parents’ happiness and clan respect. The leading female characters are shown to be on the receiving end of to injustice and infidelity imposed on them from their male significant others (i.e. husband and fathers).

Conclusions

It can therefore be concluded from the above compilation of observation that presentation of weaknesses in a women (i.e. a woman can also falter and has the right to freedom) can receive normal response unless the Indian society is willing to treat women in a humane and genuine way. Cinema indeed is reflection of changes in socio-cultural norms thereby influencing people’s perceptions and judgments. It is only when Indian society at large can perceive woman as naturally fallible as man, that audience connect with all kinds of onscreen woman portrayals in Hindi cinema would emerge.
References


