

## **PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE BODY IN INDIAN CINEMA: A REFLECTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In every society each one knows the social order of behaviour and the expectation of the society from respective genders, be it biological or social. Cinema as a medium in many ways depicts the social reality on screen. On one hand it becomes a document of the existing fashion or technology, and on the other it also is governed by the norms of the existing time and presenting the images which would reflect realism of social order. This paper attempts to see the journey of female body image in Indian cinema with specific reference to the popular actresses' body type and see if socio-economic situation was /is an influencing factor for the shift from a full body to thin waistline or from fair skin, long hairs to higher navel which is the current fad.

**Keywords:** Body Images, Cinema, Globalization, India, Women

### **Introduction**

Every society in its own way has time and again stated the way in which women should look like or the role she should play. Irrespective of the culture, women across have followed these rules and abided by them so as to get accepted in the society. The human body is therefore treated as an image of society and there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension (Douglas, 1996). According to Judith Butler, 'If gender is the social construction of sex and if there is no access to this "sex" except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender but that "sex" becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a pre linguistic site to which there is no direct access'(Butler, 1993). The social order dictates the roles of the individuals in the society based on their gender. In the larger understanding of the society men are responsible for the activities in the public sphere and be the bread earner, whereas women perform more domestic roles such as child rearing and maintain the family order. Though Margaret Mead differs with this notion and in her books *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), she suggests that there is difference between gender, sex and sexuality. And also in some societies men stay at home and concentrate on personal cosmetic beauty and women undertake manual work. In this context

gender refers to the roles people play in society and it is produced by gender division of labour, whereas sex refers to the biological construction and sexualities refer to the performance of gender identities.

During the World War I and II, social conditions pushed the working class to involve all members of a family to contribute to the overall income of the house. This again underpinned the idea to have large families and have more children. These social conditions made it imperative for women to have a fertile, physically strong and able body. This favored image of woman with broad hips and voluptuousness since she would give birth to more children and hence considered more desirable than others. It is often presumed that man is what he eats and a woman is what she looks. A woman's form is symbolic of her character. Thus traditionally an obese woman was not simply considered fat, but she was understood to be out of control for a man to cope with. The unrestrained body here is a statement of unrestrained morality. To control women's bodies is equal to controlling her personality and representing an act of authority over body in the interest of public order, organized around male values, of what ought to be right. While slenderness for men and women was the dominant norm of sexual attractiveness, Slenderness may also be ironically a denial of sexuality or more specifically of procreative functions and fertility. Corsets, jogging, exercising and anorexia are associated to weight loss or personal control eventually leading to suppression of menstruation. Today's slim woman is less likely to be looking for a marriage partner. Slimness is now under the business preview of food and drug industry, more geared to the narcissistic ends of the personal happiness, social success and social acceptability. The slim body is neither the product of ascetic drive for salvation nor the artificial aid of the corset. Instead it is a specific feature of calculating hedonism as the ethic of late capitalism (Stone, 1977).

Human bodies are subject to physical or organic needs<sup>18</sup>. Human agents live their sensual, sexual experience via the categories of a discourse of desire which is dominant in given societies, but this discourse of desire is ultimately determined by the economic requirement of the mode of production (Turner, 2007, pp. 17-32). The liberation of desire is implicitly the liberation of male desire which fails to provide any explanation of the location of women in a society where men through economic changes are either driven out of work by structural unemployment or liberated from work by automation (Turner, 2007, pp. 17-32). The commodification of sex lends support to the argument that modern society is a pornographic society, 'a society so hypocritically and repressively constructed that it must inevitably produce an effusion of pornography as both its logical expression and its subversive, demotic antidote' (Carter, 1979, p. 86).

As Borges has observed

‘The world we live in is a mistake, a clumsy parody. Mirrors and fatherhood, because they multiply and confirm the parody, are abominations. Revulsions is the cardinal virtue. Two ways whose choice the Prophet left free, may lead us there: abstinence or the orgy, excess of the flesh or its denial’ (Borges, 1972, p. 83).

The thin body is better equipped for desire. By accepting the dominant norm and denying her sexuality as a personal choice, the anorexic accepts or at least conforms to, an ethic of consumer sexuality. It is interesting to note, therefore that ballerinas who are an epitome of sexual attractiveness are, as a subculture, also commonly anorexic (Druss & Silverman, 1979). By suppressing menstruation, the daughter suppresses sexuality and adopts a permanent childlike body and attitude to the mother. On one level anorexia is a refusal to mature. At the same time, self starvation gives an enormous sense of self control via control of biological processes. Food refusal is used as a defence against the original fear of eating too much, of not having control, of giving in to their biological urges, this accumulation of power was giving her another kind of “weight” (Bruch, 1978). The ideology of the assigning value to the body goes back to the preindustrial time. The myth of beauty and ugliness have laid the very foundation of normalcy, especially the myth of Venus which has been bred into the minds of the audience and the ways of viewing a body as it appears in various visual medium (Davis, 1997). Though there are no ground rules or principle which can be used as evidence to prove that the notion of beauty or ugliness is universal or can be generalised. Looking good and feeling fine are the part of new self-indulgence which dominates world of advertisement. The narcissist culture of the modern capitalism is often seen to be evident of the decline of patriarchal structures in the home and work-place. Feminism is on the decline because of economic centrality of home as a production unit, the democratization of lifestyles, and the employment of women are all said to have weakened the traditional combination of male authority, gerontocracy, patriarchy and religion. Women under such false contentment, narcissism enjoys pseudo liberation from the family, only to be subordinated by the new culture of consumerism (Turner, 2007, p. 172).

Thus we see that over a period of time the ideal body type kept shifting with the changes in the socio-economic status of the women. Most of the time the curves or the slenderness became dominant based on the need of the society to reproduce or gain financial independence.

### **Onscreen roles and requirements for heroines**

When Indians started making films, the screen was more or less an extension of theatre and folk dance which had their premise in mythology and folklores. *Pundalik* by *Sakharam Bhatwadekar* was the first fiction film which was based on Hindu mythology as it was the kind of subject that would appeal pan Indian audience. Though the credit for proper ‘commercial’ indigenous feature film goes to *Raja Harishchandra* produced and directed by D.G. Phalke which was based on the

mythological hero '*Raja Harishchandra* Historically, the people's perception about the ideal female body type has been shaped by the dominant political environment and cultural ideals of that time and society. Films in India including *Raja Harishchandra* and others which were made later followed the cultural norms of Indian society.

Where, woman represented the continuity of life, an energy which could not be divided or diverted without a corresponding loss of vitality; she could not desire to be something other than her prescribed social role. . There was no difference between what was spiritual and what was sensuous.: Indian women did not deform their bodies in the interests of fashion; they were more concerned about service than rights: (Coomaraswamy, 1918).

The time film '*Raja Harishchandra*' was made, cinema was not looked up as a mass entertainment. Rather, it was only meant for upper class elite, and people who worked in making of these cinemas were looked down as almost outcast. Therefore the entire cast and crew of this film consisted of only male actors, including those who played the character of women on screen, as it was a social taboo for the women from upper class especially Hindu families to work on stage or screen for that matter. One aspect of early cinema was the popularity of 'Gori Miss' or the white skinned actress. As films were considered a disreputable occupation, women from respected families would not think of having any direct or indirect connection with the film business. On the other hand women of Baghdadi Jewish origin and Anglo-Indians were willing to step into films (Somaaya, Kothari, & Madangarli, 2012). The audience had a desire for these actresses to the fact that 'the male Indian spectator could possess the "English" beauty and in so doing enact a reversal of the power relation that prevailed in British-dominated colonial society' (Hansen, 1998). The kind of roles women play onscreen is more often than not, the male director's notion of what roles women ought to be playing. This notion is based on the director's beliefs, attitudes and values, combined with what the director thinks viewers want to see. The expectations of the viewer in turn is based on his beliefs, attitudes and values, which come from the social framework within which they live, which is the same in which directors, live. There has to be a consistency in the beliefs, attitudes and values of all those involved. Some of the early actresses came from varied backgrounds and diverse cultures. One of the reigning star of early 1920's and 30's *Sulochana* (original name Ruby Meyers) was a telephone operator before she debuted in *Veer Bala* (1925) a Kohinoor Film Company's film directed by *Mohan Bhavnani*. Similarly, Esther Abrahams aka *Pramilla*, who was known for her roles as vamp, came to films from Parsi travelling theatre. Among these was also Patience Cooper, who used her own name and worked as a dancer for a Eurasian troupe and a Parsi Theatrical Company before joining films. She was often cast as the sexually troubled but innocent heroine at the centre of moral dilemmas represented by male protagonists (Rajadhyaksha, 1995). Her performance in film *Pati Bhakti* (1922) raised her to hall of fame as a devoted and submissive wife *Leelavati* whose

antithesis was the other woman played by an Italian actress Signora Minelli who dressed in semi transparent costumes in her films and set the silver screen "on fire". In the 1920's Himanshu Rai an Indian film maker made Indo-German collaborative films. Starting with silent films, and later on the talkies, he made a number of films based on Indian mythology, history and social issue in which Himanshu Rai used a number of Eurasian actresses to play the female lead characters. These women were given Hindu names like *Sita Devi* - and were introduced to the public as "educated Hindu women". This variance of Eurasian actresses representing Indian historical/mythological characters, underlined the problematic of its representation (Dutta, 2000). Other actresses of that time included Renee Smith aka *Sita Devi*, Iris Casper aka *Sabita Devi*, Susan Soloman aka *Firoza Begum*, Effie Hippolet aka *Indira Devi*, Bonnie Bird aka *Lalita Devi*, Beryl Claessen aka *Madhuri* and Winnie Stewart aka *Manorama*. It was only in 1932 when *Durga Khote* an educated, English speaking Brahmin girl entered the film industry and changed the perception that not only women from low or outcaste background entered the film industry, but also from respectable families accepted the profession of acting.

Since the early days of cinema, the image of woman's body portrayed on screen has also undergone transition as well as transformation. Be it from a being a voluptuous full bloom figure or follow current trend to be size zero, the body portrayed on screen has also been influenced by the socio-economic situation of India. Indians traditionally have believed in healthy food habits and have found curved body type more desirable since it signified wealth, prosperity and ability to take care of the family. As a country the geographical location of India is close to equator which makes it a tropical country and therefore it required traditionally women to have a structure which could bear healthy children in other words a full body type was considered more fertile. This could be one of the reasons why various art forms depicted curvaceous female body.

### **Liberalization, Privatization, Globalization, Body Image and their Effect on Movies:**

In modern societies power has a specific focus; the human body is the product of political/power relationship (Foucault, 1981). The current consumerist structure of production/consumption induces in the subject a dual practice, first is linked to a split but profoundly interdependent representation of his/her body, and the second represents human body as capitalist product and as an object for fetishes. In both the cases body is far from being denied or left out, instead there is a deliberate investment in it from economic and psychical term (Baudrillard, 1998).

Post liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG), Indian film industry started attuning itself to the female body representation of the west to address the diasporas' audience. The kind of actresses which were selected to represent women were young and western in origin and were also expected to match to the body type of the western society and norm. These norms were based on the genetical makeup of the body which was based on a particular geographical

location of the region and the current social practice which was 'thin is in'. The nineteenth century corset or the twentieth century fad for slimness through dieting and exercising was meant to make sure that women conform to certain norms of beauty which men find attractive. Women accepted these notions as they would confer them with respect, praise and way to man's heart. The slim body is no longer the product of either an ascetic drive for salvation moreover it has become a symbol of consumerism, glamour and sexual availability. The oddity of the failure of sociology to develop a theory of the body and bodies is emphasized by the prevalence of commonsense notion that diet, jogging, fasting, slimming and exercise are not merely essential aids to sexual fulfillment but necessary features of self development in a society grounded in personalised consumption (Turner, 2008). Current cultural norms of female beauty emphasize slimness and slenderness in contrast to the weighty matrons of our very own *Raja Ravi Verma*. The fashion model's body is no longer an object of desire but a functional object, a forum of signs in which fashion photography pulls all its artistry into re-creating gesture and naturalness by a process of simulation. In fact in advertising and fashion both men and women refuse the status of flesh, of sex, of finality or desire, where beauty is not in the expression but in their figures (Baudrillard, 1998). Similarly, it was argued by Orbach (1981) in 'Fat is a Feminist Issue' (FIFI), that the kind of body women develop due to compulsively eating and becoming fat or by her conscious desire to become thin is undermined by the unconscious desire to be 'fat', both these cases are primarily result of women's social oppression and here 'fat' is a social disease that women are made to suffer. Government reforms introduced in 1991 dismantled then existing structures and opened doors for multinationals to enter India. The nation underwent accelerated globalisation, flooded by foreign brands and satellite- TV channels, bringing the West, with its glittering promises of glamorous, modern lifestyles, straight into middle-class homes. These changes which entered the drawing room of the middle class created confusion, anxiety and nervousness about the traditional values which it held for all these while.

There was visible transition say from hot warm freshly cooked breakfast to cold instant food or opting to move away from traditional joint family to single unit nuclear family. This also gave rise to numerous debates about who or what is 'Indian' and what is foreign. Popular Hindi films responded by reconciling global consumer life- styles with traditional 'Indian' values - their mantra was similar to the song from Popular Hindi classic *Shri 42022* or one of the post LPG film called *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*<sup>23/</sup> (2000). Such films provide reassurance in a rapidly globalizing world that 'Indian values are portable and malleable'. In a pivotal move, films shifted their diasporas Indian – an NRI aka 'non-resident Indian' - to the centre of their narratives. Super hit films like *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge* (DDLJ), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (KKHH), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Ghum* and *Yaadein* created a mythical India and at the same time endorsed global consumerism by using motif of malls. The use of shopping mall as a space of cultural melting

point also provides reassurance to moneyed NRI audiences that their pursuit of wealth and material comforts is in keeping with 'Indian' traditions (Chaudhary, 2005).

The earlier generation of Indian migrants saw these films for the sake of nostalgia, whereas the present day generation view Hindi films more in terms of an identity issue and has appropriated Hindi film music and dance as a means of cultural assertion in order to hold on to something of their own (Dutta, 2000). This motive of viewing and representing is in stark contrast to earlier films, where NRIs never appeared on screen or remained present only through letters sent home, since west was viewed as morally degenerating and spiritually bankrupt part of the globe. Bombay cinema exports elaborate staging of *Indianess* through the rituals of the so called traditional family. Such a cultural form has been argued to gratify the need for cultural affiliation and replication reproduction for the NRI. Popular Hindi films address this issue of globalisation and also endow capitalism through its fashion and advertising.

The contemporary films do continue to follow the same pattern of body representation. The lead actresses like *Katrina Kaif* or *Jacqueline Fernandez* or *Deepika Padukone* are often depicted as educated professional women who hardly explore any professional space on screen instead are shown spending most of the onscreen time wooing the man and grabbing his attention. According to Chetan Bhagat, 'Many Indian men, even the educated ones, have two distinct profiles of women, the girlfriend material and the wife material. One you party with, the other you take home. The prejudice against non-traditional women who assert themselves is strong'. screen when otherwise size zero actress while performing an 'item number' is enhanced through costumes to bring out moderate bust and rounded hips, in other words present her as desirable ideal Indian woman. The Indian film industry still looks at curves and voluptuous body to bring out the conventional *Indianess* of woman and therefore when it brings out image of Indian women in 'Sari' or rustic item girl, the camera captures the curves to satiate the visual pleasure of the audience.

### **Conclusion**

The idea of body come to us through socio-cultural formulation handed out to us through ancient temple idols, sculptures and other forms of art which suggest more rounded body as a sign of fertility. The erotic representation in these art forms signifies fertility as a matter of natural presentation of the body, and articulates its closeness to the need of the geographical position/location, the physiology of the continent. Colonialism lead to definition of what is desirable based on European notions, which meant that for a 'modern' character to be depicted on screen it had to be in accordance to the norms of west. Even though the courtesan of fifties ruled the screen and hearts of audiences as *Chandramukhi* or *Champa*, they represented the qualities, virtues of Indian woman and not the seductress of early 40's who was based on western

ideas. Here, sexuality was more about hiding than revealing which meant for body to be visible; it required certain mass which could depict shape and sensuality at the same time. Therefore contemporary Indian films depict a woman in traditional outfit, she does not represent rural space or population but aspiration of rural Indians to become urban is played out on screen. Here, modern Indian woman who conforms to the norms of west or modern world professionally on screen opts for jobs of say as a journalist or an artist who is comfortable with outfits like jeans, skirts or modern take on traditional Indian *kurta*, by wearing them without *duppatta*. The admission of shame about total nudity or exposure lead to sari being draped around body loosely as absolute nudity is considered a sign of vulgarity and lack of fertility. Also with Indian diaspora audience expanding, more films are being made keeping their demands and yearning in mind. Yet one cannot deny the fact that behind storyline and visualization there remains a dominant or core ideology to conform to conservative Indian value system. The characters might be located in any part of the globe, but do not deviate when it comes to aspiring ideal girl or woman as spouse of daughter-in-law of the house. Thus, despite the fact that Indian cinema cruises through a dozen different foreign locales in every song sequence, the idealizing concepts such as duty towards family and tradition limits the possibilities for any emancipatory journey for the heroine.

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