

# Redefining Womanhood: Subverting the Constructed Feminity in Films

**Dr. J. Anjana**

Assistant Professor, P.G. Dept. of English  
N.S.S. College, Pandalam, Kerala.

Gender studies offer a self-conscious and concerted approach to the problematic and paradoxical question of gender equity. "Gender denotes the cultural constitution of feminity or masculinity, the notions concerning what is 'appropriate' to either gender, and the ways in which these serve ideologically to maintain gendered identities" (Wolfreys, 74). The very idea of gender as a cultural construct began to gain momentum among the critical circles by the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century. As Elaine Showalter remarks, it has an "urgency and excitement of a religious awakening" (4). As the famous quote of Simon de Beauvoir suggests "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman", it is the cultural conditioning undergone by women which gets reflected on the attitudes of both women herself and the society at large. The concept of womanhood is defined in terms of patriarchal notions. Kate Millet points out in *Sexual Politics*:

Under patriarchy the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. As both the primitive and the civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture- in regard to female were also of male design. The image of woman as we know is the image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the "otherness" of woman. Yet this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which the female is "other" or alien. (46-47)

Modern critical theories had exerted tremendous impact on the emergence of gender concepts. Theoretical deliberations on decentering of identities led to the subversion of traditional gender fixations based on patriarchal stipulations. The gender dynamics which operates the social system has been a pet subject with innumerable artists. The conventional feminine construct had been celebrated by all popular art forms in India. They usually projected woman characters who lived a pious and traditional existence while those who trespassed were severely reprimanded. But of late, the conformist method of highlighting woman as victim of patriarchy is slowly undergoing a change in itself. The cultural domination of convention is challenged. There seems to be an emergence of a 'New Woman' who rather than being relegated as binary opposite or the 'Other', tries to come forward crossing the imaginary barriers. There is a free and bold expression of woman themes. This is a reflection of the metamorphosis that has crept into the very psyche of the society, slowly but steadily. There is a search for a new identity to make her life a meaningful one. From the enduring one to the reacting one, it has been a long journey. The male coded conventions accepted perennially were reconstructed by the new thinking generation. The image of 'Angel in the House' is thwarted and voices are raised against institutionalized marginalization. She emerges as an individual from her womanized existence.

Media, both print as well as visual had contributed their share in this revamping of thought process. Films are the most popular and effective medium through which social realities are reconstructed and restructured. It is the medium of mass culture which permeates every aspect of social order. Films are tools of social criticism which can act as instruments of change. Majority of films glorified the traditional existence of women characters besides victimizing those who tried to jeopardize the custom. The conventional feminine construct celebrated and perpetuated the selfless service of women was projected as the ideal concept. The motif of women-as-victim became the centre theme which exemplifies the observation of R.W Connell, "Men...enjoy patriarchal power, but accept it as it were given to them by an external force, by nature or convention or events by women themselves, rather than by an active social subordination of women going here and now" (125). Richards observes that Indian Cinema presented the "traditional and patriarchal views of society which fearful of female sexuality, demands of the woman a subjugation of her desires" (3).

Studies and research in the field of gender brought awareness in the society that women too should have equal placement in the gendered world. Conventional assumptions were challenged and their cogency questioned in the wake of gender sensitive movement both by the political groups as well as the intellectual world. The sensibilities of a group of responsive artists who were disturbed by the inhuman marginalization of women, initiated an eloquent expression of new fictional patterns woven around gender realities. They intermingled dominant issues of the contemporary world like economics, war, and race with gender in their creative expressions.

Aware of the ideological role of films in constructing gender equilibrium, more and more films emerged countering the phallogocentric portraits. The feeble voice of the subjugated womanhood finds a forceful and undeniable audible voice in many Indian films. There are a few film makers who relish in subverting conventions thereby challenging the very concept of sexuality. They are sensitive to the newly adorned individuality of womanhood and portray characters redefining gender roles. They had given various versions of the psycho dynamics of female psyche through the formidable medium of films. There is a change in attitude of film makers in portraying gender dynamics of women characters from the early times to the recent. In this paper I had made a random selection of films which subverted and reconstructed the conventional femininity.

*Mother India* released in 1957 showcased the strength and courage of Indian women, hitherto portrayed in the stereotypical light. It is an all time classic by Mehboob Khan. The woman protagonist exhibited inexorable courage and patriotism even when confronted with the most severe situation in her life. She finally takes the most daring step of killing her own erring son thereby stressing the moral courage of Indian woman. V. Shantaram's *Duniya Na Mane* (1959) also presented a woman character who antagonized the conventional concept and stood up for her own ideals and conviction.

We have a host of Indian women film makers who had given an altogether different perspective for women in their works- women not as victims of voyeurism and subjugation but women who exhibited grit and determination to transcend the gloomy and sordid realities of their lives. Prema Karanth, Vijaya Mehta, Sai Paranje, Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi, Deepa Mehta to name a few. They handled themes from a feminine frame and unraveled the dilemma, loneliness, and identity crisis of womanhood.

Aparna Sen, an actress turned director made her debut English film *36, Chowringhee Lane* which won her several laurels. Sen zooms her camera into the loneliness of a solitary Anglo Indian teacher living in Chowringhee Lane. Her lonely world gets temporarily glittered by the entry of a young couple who were her former students. They later leave her intensifying her loneliness. Aparna Sen was awarded the Presidents's Gold Medal for the Best Director and the movie was adjudged as the best English movie of the year. Her important other movies which followed the dynamics of the female mind were *Paroma, Picnic, Mrs. & Mr. Iyer, Japanese Wife* etc.

Kalpana Lajmi is better known as the director of the much acclaimed film *Rudaali* (1993). It is based on a Bengali short story by Mahasweta Devi. She portrays the miserable life of low caste woman who is left to fight her pathetic life alone. Deepa Mehta too is a luminant name among the film makers who seriously handled women issues. In her Elements Trilogy- *Water, Fire and Earth*, she dealt with various aspects of feminine psyche.

Malayalam films too had strong and powerful women characters right from its early times. We had talented film makers who had presented the various faces of feminine self through a bunch of films like from *Mindapennu, Kallichellamma, Chemmen, Agnisakhi, Panchangni, Adaminte Variyellu. Parinayam* to the more recent ones like *Kasthuriman, perumazhakkalam*, and the very recent *22 Female Kottaym*.

*Panchangni* (1986) is a brilliant product of M.T Vasudevan Nair –Hariharan combination. It presented the hitherto unsaid face of womanhood. The protagonist combines in herself a mixture of revolutionary zeal and humane compassion. The story centers around a naxal lady Indira who is undergoing life sentence in Central prison for murdering a landlord who raped a tribal girl brutally. The film sketches vivid shorts of how she gets marginalized in the society as well in her own family when she comes home for parole. She could not betray her sensitive self even when things were going in favour of her. In the end when she was about to get a release from her sentence with the help of a media person, she was forced to kill her friend's husband. She happened to witness him raping a maid servant girl along with his friends. She just could not help herself from being her real sensitive self in front of gross injustice. There was an absolute subversion of the traditional feminine image in the film

*Agnisakhi* (1999) projected a woman protagonist seeking to break free from the world of customs and rituals. She forsakes her beloved world in search of self-actualization. It is a film adaptation by Shyamaprasad of a novel of the same name by Lalithambika Antharjanam.

*Perumazhakkalam* (2004) presented two ladies divided culturally and dialectically, but going through the same emotional turmoil. The two though bound close by tradition and custom rose up in their own timid and self-effacing way to emphasize innate human goodness.

When it reached 2012, the film *22 Female Kottayam* has subverted all androcentric notions of patriarchy hitting right at its centre. This critically reviewed film was directed by Aashiq Abu. It portrays a very familiar situation of a Malayali nurse, young, talented and ambitious, decides to work in Bangalore. She considers Bangalore to be the gate way for an outer world abroad. She encounters a recruiting agent who has a diabolic inner self concealed in a romantic façade. He is a high profile pimp which she is completely unaware of. He traps her in his lustrous love and donates her to a political Godman keeping her in dark about his malicious manipulations. She was brutally raped by the political man twice and later they both meticulously traps her in a drug trafficking case. In her imprisoned state, she comes across many women who had reacted against the atrocities and humiliations meted out to them. This was

a learning experience for her. She realizes her inner strength and plots successfully to take revenge upon her perpetrators. She kills the God man and later cuts off the male sexual organ of her one time lover, the recruiting agent. This was the ultimate subversion of phallogocentric hegemony bringing a leveling of gender divide in this film.

It has been an audacious step by the film maker to present such a strong willed women character. The transformation that has happened to the character after her imprisonment has been powerfully portrayed. When got exposed to the ugly and gross realities of lives of her fellow prisoners who had been cruel victims of the patriarchal world, she gradually discovers her inner courage. As her victim after castration comments ‘ you are the real woman’. From being a docile, submissive, naïve girl, she is reborn into a thinking, scheming, revengeful one. She takes the position usually attributed to the male hero-of taking revenge. It was a revolutionary concept in Malayalam films. This film has a distant echo of 2010 English film “*I spit on your Grave*”, which also presents a woman character who takes revenge violently on her perpetrators who had tortured her in an unprecedented manner.

Movie makers are getting aware of the radical and revolutionary change in the dynamics of feminine psyche. They try to experiment with the innumerable way a female mind works to achieve self –actualization. The stifling concept of gender identities are questioned since they tend to question the inner realities of womanhood. There has been a wider acceptance of what Padmini Mongia has commented, “...identities are not fixed but subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power....identities are the names we give to different ways we positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past” (11).

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