
Agnee (The Fire): Portrayal of Women in Bangladeshi Cinema

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Abstract:

Most of the movies in Bangladesh are made with male dominant storyline. The images of women portrayed as a good wife or a virtue of sacrifice. In such circumstances women's role were changing along with the social transformations. This paper analyze women's images on screen using Bangladeshi cinema "Agnee (2014)" as an example. The paper will review the literatures on the field of feminist film critic, aiming to review on how women's are portrayed in the Indian and Bangladeshi cinema. However, the methodology for this study is firstly literature review. Secondly, this paper will analyze Bangladeshi movie Agnee (The Fire).

Key words: Agnee, women's image, Bangladeshi cinema

Introduction:

The issues of media, identity and gender are being discussed today. The reason is the popularity and diversity of media as a source of mass consumption and its influence on constructing ideas and generating debate. The media scene has expanded in the recent times as there is a plethora of media choices available to the audiences. Women are also major consumers of

mass media and thus the way they represented in media coverage is a major concern for the discipline.

The interest in films taken by feminists stems from concern about the under-representation and misrepresentation of women in cinema. It adopts a critical approach towards gender bias on celluloid. The feminist approach to cinema asks a few pertinent questions like how women are represented on screen, how women's issues are treated in cinema, what does feminism mean to film-makers, how does the feminist agenda manifest on screen, how is the women character positioned the male character and what is the role of women film-makers and women writers in depicting women's issues through cinema.

The relationship between women and film has a very significant literature. Unfortunately this kind of in-depth research has not done in Bangladesh in large scale.

My aim in this research is to explore how women have been portrayed in film. To reach my aim I have reviewed literature. Tried to explore and discussed about little study done by some researchers. Finally, analyze recent movie *Agnee* (2014). Here the protagonist character is female.

In my literature review I took Indian film. As we know Indian cinema are very popular besides Bangla cinema in Bangladesh. So that we can relate how these two kind of industry portrayed women on screen.

Women's in Indian Cinema:

The issue of identity is central to female emancipation. When this question is attached to gender relations in a male dominant society especially Muslim community in India, it acquires multiple dimensions. Kumar Parag has written a Journal paper titled "Identity of Muslim Women in Hindi Movies". He is from Department of Humanities of NIT, Jalandhar, India. The titled paper said, identity is an important issue for Muslim women as they are frail in power ratio.

Parag mentioned, they are patented to be mothers, faithful daughters, dedicated or obedient wives who do not question the authority of their male counterparts. His study is based on the analysis of four Hindi movies, *Nikkah* (Marrage) released 1982, *Bazaar* (Market) released in 1982, *Bombay* released in 1995 and *Fiza* (Atmosphere) released in 2000. He took these films because all these movies are Muslim centered films but he tried to examine the difficulties faced by Muslim women who are from marginalized community.

Author discussed about the first movie *Nikkah* directed by B.R.Chopra who is known to make movies with strong social undercurrent, depicts the character of Muslim protagonist. Through the movie the director has taken a socially relevant topic of divorce. Though the movie was made in 1982 the problems of divorce is still a very relevant issue. Muslim male uses word "Talaq" as a weapon to make their wives submissive. He can divorce his wife unilaterally even without informing her.

Parag observed the wider spread of education in 1970 and 1980 resulted in the advent of a new class of audience who were more interested in the movies related with social issues. He also mentioned this class of audience belonged to middle class and higher middle class families want to identify with the movies which are related to problem faced by them like riots, dowry problem and prostitution.

However, the second movie Parag discussed that is "*Bazaar*" directed by Sagar Sarhadi, released in 1982, depict the plight of Muslim women from subaltern class. *Bazaar* is based on realistic incidents of buying of teenage and young Muslim girls by wealthy persons belonging to Gulf countries. The movie has two main female characters.

The movie is deliberately based in the city of Hyderabad as selling and buying of girls happens in this city. Although the female protagonists are from humble origin, yet they are not shown submissive in the movie. They gather courage and strength to raise their voices against the suppression. All the

characters in the movie have either yearning for love or money. This movie is different from Nikaah. In Nikaah men are instrumental to decide women's identity and future and vulnerability of weaker sex is stressed. But Bazaar is little different from Nikaah where the key character stresses that individuality of a women can be gained by economic independence.

This is how Kumar Parag discussed these movies and portrayal of women. The third movie named "Bombay" which is released in 1994 directed by a South Indian director Maniratnam, tried for the first time to interpret the complex relation between Hindus and Muslims by putting focus on female protagonist. But the main concern of the movie is to depict religious construction of Muslim women which is the central part of her identity. The movie is unique too as for the first time on the silver screen the marriage of a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl is shown.

Finally, discussed about the Fiza release in 2000, in another complex Muslim women centric movie directed by critic turned director Khalid Mohammad. Here the modern face of Muslim woman is shown.

The story revolves around a stubborn Muslim girl Fiza Ikramullah who goes out in search of his brother Amman who disappeared after riots which erupted due to the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1993. In the movie the female protagonist is presented in a glamorous way. The director has tried to interpret female Muslim identity in context of postcolonial period in the light of rise of Hindu nationalism. Here a modern Muslim woman is shown who takes charge to find her own brother not depending on her male counterpart.

The author concludes and said, in these movies women's are not treated in abstract manner. The basic projection of these female protagonists center around the demand for space, identity and recognition. However, we can see from his discussion and understand that, in these movies female

protagonists enjoy key positions and try to break out of social environmental forces which are controlled men.

But in most films, either Hindi or in regional, the glamorous women have projected as sex toys- for whom 'Independence' looks another country- so unreal. (Swati Deb: 2013)

In 1950s and 1960s, women are generally regarded as natural subservient to male protagonists. Specially, Meena Kumari, Nutan and other thrived with oriental values where women are meant to suffer and sacrifice. But by 1980s and 1990s things changed, women dared to set free from straight jacket formula.

"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Laura Mulvey, 1975) mentioned, the male character was identified as the driver of the films narrative, the character followed by the camera. The female character serves as a spectacle to provide pleasure to the male spectator, for which Mulvey used the term 'gaze'.

Well, the image of women as 'Sita' has been repeatedly evoked in many films after independence. Through the ideas of loyalty and obedience to husband, Hindi cinema successfully institutionalized patriarchal values. (Nidhi Shendurnikar Tere: 2012).

But what is the relationship between women and popular Hindi cinema? such kind question raised by Nidhi Shendurnakar Tera in her research titled "Gender Reflections in Mainstream Hindi Cinema". She mentioned, Bollywood heroines have mostly been homely, content to stay happily ever after in the institution of marriage even if educated and keen to curve and identity of one's own. Where are the women building careers and working professionally? They have been almost silenced.

Nidhi thoughts- working woman vanished from the popular blockbusters of the nineties which relegated Indian women to the boundary of the home. The concern boils down to embodiment of women who stay next door, walk on the street,

spend time working in office and return home after a tiring day. Nidhi asked question, where are these women in Hindi cinema? Women's role to providing glamour, relief, respite and entertainment. Nidhi gives many example about how portrayed women in Hindi cinema. Like, Priyanka Chopra's character in *Agneepath* (2012) is not of any significance to the story as such. It is only to give the audience a break from the tedious scenes of violence and drama. She is there only as a romantic partner to Hrithik Roshan who is busy in avenging his father's brutal murder.

In a research work on "Cinema and Society: Reflection of Patriarchal Values in selected Hindi Blockbusters" (Mukta Chakravorty, 2002), the researcher has tried to study the relationship between patriarchal values and popular cinema and how such values get reinforced through this medium. She talks about *Hum Apke Hain Koun* (1994), in which the main protagonist (Nisha) and her sister Pooja are shown to be a computer scientist and a painter respectively. Ironically though, they are never shown to be in their work place. They mostly occupy the house and the kitchen. Even though they are modern and confident women, they submit to the desires of their family and are eventually domesticated. A women in this film is seen only as one who can cook, not earn for the family.

At the end of discussion we can say, the woman of substance is missing from portrayals, the women who can lead her life independently and take decisions without relying on any male. In such scenario, women are seen to be not just physically inferior to men but also intellectually inferior. Film makers don't take the effort to associate qualities like intellect and decision-making with female characters.

Women on Screen in Bangladesh Cinema:

A famous quote known as the Thomas theorem, we can begin to understand the potentially damaging effects of stereotypes: "if [people] define situations as real, they are real in their

consequences." In other words, when people accept stereotypes as true, then they are likely to act on these beliefs, and these subjective beliefs can lead to objective results.

In Bangladesh little film studies have been done. I have found "Women on Screen" by Bikash Ch. Bhowmick. He attempt to make a study on women's representation that covers both mainstream and independent films.

He deals with six mainstream and eleven documentary films. Well, he discussed about the different modes of representation of women in these films by women filmmakers in Bangladesh. Bhowmick also studies objectification of women on screen as well as the roles (wives, mother, adulteress, and defendant) women are given on screen by these women directors in Bangladesh.

In his study Bhowmick observed that among all the mainstream films, only K. Sarwar's "Ayna (2006)", women have been portrayed in a way that challenges the traditional roles of women in society. On the other hand, in most of the documentary films women's non-traditional images have had importance than their traditional images have had importance than their traditional roles in society. Bhowmick used qualitative research methods to end up. He also conducted from ideological and subjective viewpoint.

In social-ideological film study, the study of women in cinema in more interesting and at the same time complicated. The study of women in cinema grew out of women's studies as psychology grew out of philosophy, politics grew out of history and so on and now both women's studies and cinema are the global issue (Bikash Ch. Bhowmick: 2009).

Feminist studies are not organized in Bangladesh in all the discipline and so to speak it is almost absent in film arena-basically in popular cinema, though a little has been done.

Bhowmick mentioned some issues about representing modes of women by women in Bangladesh Popular cinema.

The introductory "overview" in the first issue of Women and film locates the female image in terms of stereotypes:

These roles- woman, whore, bitch, wife, mother, secretary, frigid career woman, vamp, ect.- were all portrayed falsely and one dimensionally.

Bhowmick used Noame Gilberts comment for mentioning second issue of women and film.

“The female is portrayed with an archetypal ambivalence. The “Eternal Feminine” has been aesthetically more a principle for realizing male objectives than a person in her own right. Thus the dynamic of myth and reality when converging upon a female aesthetic has been quintessentially objectifying... The terms of the female aesthetic have been imposed on the basis of man’s fears and desires.”

The women whome we treat as an object, immediately after becomes a mother. Bhowmick discussed some movies on it. In the film Char Sateenere Ghar, Fulbanu’s father has decided to wed Fulbanu with Kashem Khan, the rich man who already has three wives, as because Fulbanu’s father will receive enormous amount of landed property if he hands over Fulbanu to Khan. Fulbanu never accepted the proposal with ease. She did not want to give in her to the monstrous desire of her covetous father. Although she wedded Kashem Khan, she had taken word from Khan before wedding not to take any kinds of dowry from her father. We can see the story of this women directed film that the male desire has been resisted in different ways.

A woman must perform the responsibilities allocated by the society; this is the desire of a male dominated society. A patriarchate always wants, every woman must possess all the qualities of Sita, such as she must be sexually pure, be caring to husband’s happiness, specialized in house hold management. She will play different roles- daughter before her marriage when she is subservient to her father.

Bangladeshi popular cinema has perpetuated these images of an ideal woman mainly through her self-sacrificing devotion to her husband and the family. But some cinema we

see women are coming out of their homes and striving to create position in her life.

Analysis of Agnee (The Fire):

In 1950, Bangladesh Film Industry started its journey and it took a while for the Industry to get proper platform to expose its talents. It has been learnt from wikipedia sources that, Bangladesh Film Industry took 50 years of time to synchronize with the norms and culture of Bangladesh. In the 90's, on average 80 films per year would get proper release to be viewed. It has been seen that, with that moving speed, the number of films on average have risen to 100 per year for release since the millennium.

If the assumed calculations are falling in the right way, then it can be said that Bangladesh Film Industry has increased its rate of film production on a faster scale. Although, the vast expansion in the rate of film production has not created much new dimension for the storyline of the films. But along with the changing course of time, the budget for new films have also widened to let much money to be spent. Before Independence, the film based on Zahir Raihan's lifestory was successful to give a new turn to the making of Bangladesh films. There are more other talents as Kabir Chowdhury, Sajedul Awal, Tanvir Mokammel, Morshedul Islam, Tarek Masud and Mostafa Sarwar Farooqui who have differently expressed their films to the audience after the Independence.

Storyline of Agnee:

"No one is born as a woman, it is the woman in you who is born", a very famous and powerful dialogue related to feminism was delivered by Siemon the Bouvourier, who is one of the most influential woman of eternity.

In the movie "Agnee" which got released in 2014. Agnee is a Bangladeshi Bengali language women-centric crime thriller

film. Directed by Iftakar Chowdhury. Stars Mahiya Mahi, Arefin Shuvo, and many more. Releasing on 14 February 2014. The main role of the movie was played by Tanisha, which is the main gist of the film. Mahiya Mahi is playing the female leading role in this film. She was portrayed as a murderer in the film who eagerly hunts for the killers of her parents.

Tanisha resides in Thailand for the purpose of search and among all these there will be flashbacks. From here, it will be known that why the title “Agnee (The Fire)” is used.

The disguised name of the male leading role is Dragon. His real name is Shishir. His role in the film is as a security officer. The role of Shishir has been played by Arefin Shuvo. The security offered to Tanisha’s parents’ death is given by Shishir. And from here the storyline continues.

Women's in Agnee:

In the film “Agnee” the role played by the females can be divided into segments. The first phase is implemented by the leading role, Tanisha. The next female role is played by Shishir’s Aunt. One more role is played by Tanisha’s Mother.

The role of Tanisha’s Mother was not expressed in much detail and hence the role could not develop in the film. This role was only available in the flashback. When the death scene of Tanisha’s parents were being shown, it is during that time when the viewers get to see Tanisha’s childhood and her mother. In that scene, Tanisha’s father lifts the shotgun to Tanisha’s mother for their protection. Though this scene is not clearly understood by the audience. The question that arises in audience mind is that, how can Tanisha’s mother use a powerful gun like a shotgun during that era of time?

The role of Tanisha’s Mother rises many questions and creates confusions. She runs around here and there. She then gets hit by a bullet and drops down on the floor. As a result, no conclusion can be set about this role.

Now, it's time to focus on the role of Tanisha. This role was first expressed as a coward person. And rapidly moves towards the epitome of bravery. During her childhood, her parents were brutally killed in front of her naive eyes. She learns how to fight with life. She learns not to fear the hard times and move on in life.

Particularly, when some goons started to follow her up, and she hides the memory card given to her by her father inside her mouth. And at the ask of the police, she takes it out by puking. Her intelligence is reflected in this scene.

On the other side, when police starts to follow her up, she locks herself in the dikky. After reaching Dhaka, she finds out the address of her Maternal Uncle house.

Among all these, the young girl is shown to be brave. An alone girl rises many problematic situations in our society. Many social related issues come up.

Nothing of this sort was included in the cinema. Without any question, Tanisha reaches her destination. Wearing a school dress she lands up in dhaka. Then promises her Uncle to be "Agnee". The revenge comes in front. It can be said that, its not only the male figures who get ignited by the fact of revenge, the women also do.

Controversial question arises in this point. Why will a woman have to be a murderer in order to seek revenge?

Now, the role played by a foreign lady will face discussion. She is the leading role Shishir's Aunt. The role played by the female in Thailand were not upto the mark. But her work was successfully completed. The director tried to show her as a romantic person, but now with much details.

The director did sync the relationship of her with a Bangladeshi husband. Her role was expressed with all the basic Bangladeshi woman qualities embedded in a foreign figure.

The film is sometimes filled with murder and blood, sometimes with innocence and sometimes with romanticism. The name of the film is different. All throughout the cinema, the name of the actress is Tanisha. A simple idea of the film is

that, the actress will be very appealing. So that the audience feels heartily connected with her.

The director who can work out the film more, the more successful the film becomes. Which means, beauty plays a major role here. This beauty is the most expensive treasure of cinema. In today's date, beauty of a woman is used for business purposes as well.

Often, the beauty is treasured as an object. Susan Jarscol(2004) showed that, during the most beautiful lady competition, the beautiful ladies are selected so that the beauty of a woman can be used as an object in the market. The beauty of a woman is transported for the earning of an organisation, how fair is it? Can this accusation be tagged by the beautiful ladies league?

Anyways, we were discussing about Agnee film features. With the role of the leading actress comes along the wardrobe and make up. In that case, it is worth 100%. The makeup and clothes worn by the actress is appreciable and matchable with the role. With respect to action, the way the cinema should be delivered, the director did put effort through his lens for this accomplishment. The director tried to pull out the role of females from the common naive features of a Bangladeshi woman into a western shape.

A Bangladeshi woman is shy, cultured and secretive. All of these features were properly displayed in the cinema. The secret was tried by Shishir. Some loop holes were found in that move. In Bangla cinema, the women were frequently seen to do such action scenes. But western outlook was not delivered by any. Sometimes it was the lack of the director's effort. And sometimes it was lack in the acting of the female actor. In that respect, Mahiya Mahi has stepped forward. She succeeded in displaying her to be a glamorous and sexy woman. Though, there are questions about her acting.

This means the director's effort was to display the main role as glamorous and sexy. This effort clearly got appreciation but the transformation into western was not that

properly expressed. The director did not want to showcase the woman as just female characters. He tried his best to show their indulgence and status.

Agnee does not fall in the common group of Bangla serials which disclose Bangladeshi woman as weak and helpless characters. It was out of the common range. The message to be delivered was, if woman wants she can do anything and everything. The director wanted to give the female characters strength and motive to fight for their own rights. But the question remains, is it necessary to wrap the woman as a murderer figure to seek revenge?

Conclusion:

These are the demands from the common audience when they enter the cinema hall. The audience pays for the ticket to get entry into the cinema hall hoping for entertainment. And it is important to see if the director is providing the audience with that entertainment or not. Helpless and weak woman characters are often portrayed in cinemas which we are used to see. In the film Agnee, the glamour displayed by the role of Mahi was appreciable. New dimensions need to be implemented in cinema. New drama needs to be included. Here I found in many situations males are defined in relation to females, whether most of the film women are defined in relation to men. In Agnee women identity and status is totally different from other traditional Bangla cinema. Here, women have given impression that women can create them as complete human beings.

The transformation of helpless woman to a brave person was displayed in this movie. But, the storyline of the film falls into the old previously used Bangla film stories. Adding to this, action scenes are more in number than the real story.

There is no way to interpret the storyline in the film. The same old story! The parents were killed and the actor will take revenge. In order to do so, the actor is either a criminal or

a security officer. This story has been dominating the Bangla cinema for long.

Though, some change in drama have been brought by the director. Instead of the actor, the director has placed the actress.

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