REINCARNATING PATRIARCHY AND PREJUDICE: A STUDY ON INDIAN COUNTER FILMS

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Abstract:

Cinema as a popular media of mass consumption plays a key role in moulding opinions, constructing images and reinforcing dominant cultural values. As a mirror reflecting the social as well as cultural ethos, films become successful in representing the existing gender equations in our society. Being a typical patriarchal society, tightly bound in the constraints of traditional social structure in which the role of woman is always delineated, oppressed and considered as an inferior being, this specific gender stereotypes in social system find its reflection in cinema as well. Popular cinema usually takes male as protagonist and often constructs an ideological image of women and traps them within certain predetermined roles and stereotypes. In an art form that largely casts men in the lead roles and women as supporting cast, there are some films that deviated from the conventional stereotypical pattern and depicted strong women characters which left a mark on the society and became an inspiration to many. We categorize such films as 'Counter films' because it refers to the diverse genre of movies which stand in opposition to the mainstream cinema. Breaking the gender stereotypes and empowering women are catchwords of female oriented movies or feminist counter films. So when films labeled as Counter films with a female protagonist the assumption was that such gender stereotypes will also dissolve with time. This paper examines three recent Indian female sports movies- Mary Kom (2014), Dangal (2016), and Kanaa (2018) which can be treated as feminist counter films. It concentrates on the idea that the view of introducing empowered woman as a model to the entire women world is contrasted with
the same woman who is denied of choosing her desired career or like a typical Indian woman, who is always under the feet of patriarchal authorities such as father, husband or mentor. The paper here challenging the concept of female counter films and questions whether the genre is capable of redefining the engendering in Indian popular cinema.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Sports movies, Gender, Stereotype

"Men need her, love her, worship her and write about her. But they do so in relation to their own selves" (Woolf 41).

The role of women in Indian cinema had gone through tremendous transitions since its inception decades before. From meek roles of dependents of their male counterparts and as sob stuffs, they have evolved in greater manner as the catalysts of the plot's advancement. They have been provided the centre stage which has been denied to them so far and made a part of the main stream instead of merely being the object of sexual desire. The change in representation of women from passive dolls to active independent individuals can be considered as a positive yet vibrant makeover from the traditional framework. This transition results in the so called 'Counter films' or 'women-centric' films, where they can give ample space for women, they wanted. The female sports films emerged during the twenty first century can be regarded as a counter movement that the Indian film industry has witnessed. Feminist counter films usually aims at women in the lead roles are highlighted and given more inclination as a strong character which shatters the stereotypical roles performed in earlier films.

Recent movies such as MaryKom, Dangal and Kanaa stands distinctly from the rest of the typical Indian movies. This marked distinction lies in the fact that they are female sports films as they try to expose the life of female protagonists who choose their career in the arena of sports. Hence these films are categorized as 'feminist movies' or 'counter films' that stands apart from the conventional pattern of Indian movies which mainly focuses on the existing gender power structure where men are placed at the centre of power. However, when films labeled as Counter films with a female protagonist appear, the assumption is that such stereotypes will also disappear. But this is far from reality. While analysing female sports films such as Marykom, Dangal and Kanaa, it
is evident that just because a woman is depicted as the lead in a film does not mean that the particular mindset or gendered stereotypes are totally absent in these movies. Consciously or unconsciously, these female oriented movies incorporate certain elements of patriarchy as well as reaffirm the existing stereotypical roles that both genders must perform.

*MaryKom*, the biopic under the direction of Omung Kumar made its theatrical debut in India on 5th September 2014. The biopic narrates epic journey of India's most high-profile female boxer Mary Kom, a Manipur rice farmer's daughter who went on to become five-time world amateur boxing champion and bronze medalist in the 2012 Summer Olympics. Even though considered as a 'feminist movie', the film *Mary Kom* encompasses the authority of male characters over her life, and also the elements of gender constructs mainly of marriage, motherhood and so on. The film opens with pregnant Mary Kom, heading towards hospital with her husband Onler Kom. The opening scene of the film itself intensifies the fact that motherhood is a game changer in every woman's life. In the case of a sportsperson it should normally be the full stop of her career and dreams. This scene captures the traditional stereotypical element of 'motherhood' as one of the most inevitable stages in every woman's life. Our society considers 'motherhood' as the yardstick for defining femininity or womanhood. Here too the shining star in boxing also passes through the stage of motherhood.

One of the three prominent male characters in the movie is Mary Kom's husband - Onler Kom. A husband like Onler who lets the wife pursue her professional ambitions at the cost of his own career or comfort is a rarity. Through the character of Onler, we saw a promising football player turned coach setting his priorities and adjusting his life to give space to his wife to regain her lost pride. But at the same time, the character of Onler is extremely glorified in the movie by saying that being a male, Onler sacrifices his own career. This kind of glorification of a male who supports her wife intentionally says that it is only through the support of a male partner, a woman can build up her career, dreams and aspirations. This instance of glorification can be compared and contrasted with another recent biopic *M S Dhoni: The Untold Story*. Here in the case of Dhoni, marriage doesn't become an obstacle in the path of his career. When sports are considered as a barrier in a woman's life to find a partner or to enter into a marriage relation, it becomes an ornament for men. He is not asked to give up his sports career in the name of marriage. He is not questioned and he did not want to convince anyone. Along with this, like Mary's life partner here
too we see the wife of Dhoni who becomes a constant support in his life and makes adjustments, her acts are not glorified and treated as normal duties that a wife should perform. What it reflects is the existing patriarchal ideas that effectively reinforce the stereotypes and present them as 'natural'.

The intervention of patriarchy in the life of Mary Kom starts from childhood onwards. Here too, we saw a conventional father, who doesn't support her passion towards boxing. He declares that he won't allow his daughter to be disfigured in a 'male' sport, forever hampering her marriage prospects. He is only worried about his daughter's marriage. He felt boxing would indeed reduce Mary's chances of finding an able groom. And also Mary had taken much more time to prove herself and her father also takes more time to understand her real passion. The voice of patriarchal strains that shatters the dreams of many women can be clearly cited with an example from an instance in the film Mary Kom. The act of burning the boxing gloves by Mary's father is a way of asserting patriarchy.

When Mary Kom informs her coach about her marriage with Onler, he forbids her from tying the knot- he believes that a national level champion has no business in marrying as marriage means dead end for a woman. She is caught between choices- between hope and regret and she moves into married life. After marriage, like every typical Indian woman, she was also unwillingly forced to fit into the stereotypical framework of a house wife. She lost her connection with boxing and sometimes she expresses her regret and grief about her lost career. And also the presentation Mary's re-entry into the field of boxing is mainly concentrated upon her coach- Narjit Singh. And for once when she lost her confidence, her coach boosts her by saying: Motherhood makes a woman stronger and thus Mary is double stronger because she is blessed with two kids.

Thus through these male characters, the film Mary Kom is also once again fixing the conventionally followed idea that a female can stand only with the support and guidance of a male figure - here it lies in the form of father, husband and a coach. The film consciously or unconsciously establishes the idea that she is unable to take a decision or use her strength and potential without depending on these male characters.

The movie Dangal depicts the story of Aamir Khan playing an old father and his two daughters fighting odds to win medals for the country. Mahavir Singh Phogat, played by Aamir
Khan, wanted his wrestling legacy to be carried on by his son, but he was "blessed" with daughters only. Preference for a boy child and the reaction of the villagers when Mahavir's wife fails to give birth to a son are evidently seen in the film. His wife also repents that she is not able to give birth to a boy-child. Not only in the film but also in the society the preference for a boy child and seeing a girl child as a burden to the family is the day light reality.

After some extent, the movie focuses on the shift in attitude of Mahavir, when his older daughters Geeta and Babita come home after beating up two boys in response to derogatory comments. From that moment he realizes their true potential to become wrestlers. This act brings the light of new hope in him. He saw the scope of making his dream come true which made him imagine his daughters in the role of wrestlers and begins coaching them. Here also the image of an authoritarian father figure is seen, Mahavir acts as a conventional father who was not bothered or concerned about his daughters desires about their own career. Mahavir was not different from any other parent of our society who puts the burden of their unfulfilled dreams on the shoulders of children.

Generally, Dangal is seen as a feminist movie, the reality is that the centre of attraction was definitely Mahavir and not Geeta or Babita. Definitely, they were important characters, but they were secondary and the prime focus of the film lies in the efforts made by the father. From the beginning of the film to the end, the story is centered on him, his dreams, his predicaments and his challenges. The film presents a man who is so stubborn in nature by his male ego. Here also Dangal reinforces the traditionally followed masculine gender identity that girls must never question the patriarchal head. Without the consent of daughters, Mahavir trains them. Every time when the girls try to rebel against him they are proven wrong and daddy is always right. The idea of training his daughters from being wrestlers was a radical one, as it was different from the hitherto gender roles in that society, as described in the film. Mahavir too faced criticism from the society he exists. As a part of achieving his aim, Phagot made them cut their hair short and denied them their favourite food when they were in training. Cutting of their hair too symbolizes that women are unable to enter into the sports field along with upholding their femininity.

Gender based stereotypical role functions also works in this movie. The villagers ridiculed Geeta and Babita wearing "men's shorts", cutting hair in 'men's style'. From the villager's point of view, women are born to obey the tradition and follow the societal conventions of a patriarchal
society. And it is stamped upon the women that their life is to be circled around the four walls of house by doing chores such as cleaning, cooking, taking care of the whole family and so on.

Both Geetha and Babita hate wrestling. Still they were forced to obey what their father says. At first these daughters shows their disagreement with their father. They feel that they are missing a 'normal' girl's life. But at certain point, it is their friend makes them realize "how fortunate they are to have a father like Mahavir who is paying attention to his children; otherwise usually in our society, parents got their young girls married off as soon as they reach puberty." She also reveals them about the future of a woman as unpaid domestic workers and reproductive machines. And thus, they choose wrestling as a way to escape from marriage. So they eventually realized what the society stamps upon women - the bearers of 'marriage' and 'motherhood'.

Even though the movie celebrates the evolution of a female wrestler from a remote village in Haryana but it is actually Mahavir who takes the charge on questioning the gender roles. It is Mahavir, an authoritarian father who took the charge on changing how women are perceived and treated in the society. Thus the movie exposes the idea that in a patriarchal society like India, it is important for the dominant gender to take charge to make life better for the oppressed and marginalized women. And also the female characters do not succeed in transcending the patriarchal structure which is in place. They have not yet been liberated from its shackles and never really come out from the shadows of the patriarch who is their father. Geetha and Babita merely follow what their father says and they travel through the path directed by their father. And now and then proven wrong when the attempt to make their own decisions. These female characters are also once again seen as becoming the victims of male authority like other typical Indian movies.

The Tamil movie Kanaa, traces the growth of a female cricketer who comes from a rural village in Tamil Nadu. The film captures the hardships and questions encountered by a girl who loves cricket which is considered as a male sport by the society. Being a female oriented sports movie, Kanaa too exposes the ways in which a patriarchal society works and how it reinforces the traditional gender stereotyping. Unlike the films Dangal and Marykom, the movie Kanaa presents a doting father who stands firmly along with his daughter and her ambitions. Little Kousalya wants to play cricket to make her father happy. She saw her father weep when India lost a crucial match and she is determined to make India win for his sake. Here, the film points out that the female protagonist take cricket because of her father's love towards cricket. But at the same time she is
not compelled or forced by anyone to play cricket. Unlike the authoritarian father in Dangal or like a father having patriarchal mindset in Mary Kom, here Murugesan is a supporting father so he does not take it as a serious matter when his daughter starts playing cricket. He defends his daughter even in her absence, and does everything to make her happy. From an ordinary farmer, the father gets transformed into an advocate of his daughter's passion towards cricket. When Kousalya informs her father about her failure in the final exam, he doesn't yell at her.

On the contrary to the presence of a supportive father like Murugesan, Kousalya’s mother stands against her desire to become a cricketer. Her mother allowed her to play cricket with boys, till she reaches puberty. When her mother finds that her grown-up daughter is playing cricket with men, she doesn't calm her anger. Also she warns Kousalya about the roles that a woman should perform, playing with boys is regarded as a drawback in her character and also the family's pride will suffer. This reinforces the society's notion of how a woman should frame her life in accordance with the gender roles designed by the society. She is only bothered about what will people say when they see a girl dressed in t-shirt and pants and playing with a bunch of boys. Not only her mother alone, but the majority of that village mistreats her in playing cricket with boys. She earns the wrath of many villagers as she plays cricket with boys wearing t shirts and pants which is not considered as a traditional dress code that a woman should wear. The villagers also blame her father and mother regarding her decision in playing cricket. The whole society is trying to stamp the basic idea of gender rules that a woman should follow in her life. They can't even imagine a girl playing cricket which is entirely considered as man's game. The film talks about the general mentality of society and how judgmental they get about women and their career choices.

In the second half of the movie, like other female sports movies, here also enters a cricket coach- Nelson Dileep Kumar. The film shows that it is the male coach who identifies her real potential and capabilities in the cricket field and trains her in the right path. The entire game is controlled by the male coach and his intention was to hide Kousalya's talent from the opponents, and her bowling would be a surprise element in the semi finals. Even though the role played by the male coach comes only after the second half of the film, it exaggerates the role of coach by focusing on the aspects such as it is the coach who solves the internal conflicts existed in the team, between the players and it is he who motivates the entire team and it is from the coach, Kousalya gains confidence to give a stunning comeback in the climax that leads to the team’s final victory.
Cinema not only crystallizes new beliefs but also reaffirms the traditional conventions. Consciously or unconsciously, these counter films upheld the notion that it becomes more effective only when a man questions patriarchy or encourages women to break the gender conventions. This idea contradicts with the very concept of what counter films are trying to promote. Marykom, Dangal, and Kanaa introduce male coaches, father, husband etc as the main supportive force behind the success of female protagonists. The guidance provided by their coach and support given by her husband as well as father, reinforces the idea that even though films intended to uplift women and uphold the ideas of women empowerment also supports and reinforces the gender ideology that women as a dependent on man. These movies carry strong male characters as an instrumental force for gaining audience attention. These films once again focus on issues that every woman had to encounter from their birth itself. Her birth is even labeled as a misfortune by the society. The desire for a male child in the film Dangal is the result of the regressive patriarchal mindset which even consider woman as an entity that is to be exchanged from father to husband.

A typical Indian woman's life whether it is in cinema or in her real life is placed within the comfort zone of family. They are presented as being safe and comfortable within the four walls of their home. India's pride Boxer Mary Kom's life is too once placed in the so called comfort zone of the family. Her story is not only about the story of a sports woman, but also the story of a woman who have done so many sacrifices to keep her family intact. The language of cinema normally worships those men as hero who left their career for their female counterpart. Whereas if such an action happens from the side of women it is considered as something that is 'normal'. In our society a vast majority of the sacrifices are done by women in order to create a better family. But their sacrifices are no valued and they are always considered as the typical 'duties' a woman must perform. They are not rewarded or glorified, however this kind of asserting their duties still continues.

The social institution called "marriage" also shatters the dream of many women who wishes to frame a career is also drawn in these films. Like Mary Kom's father, a typical Indian parent considers marriage as a crucial moment in their daughter's life. A woman's life is maintained only for the concept of marriage. 'Marriage' is not the final word in a girl's life. And the instance where Mary Kom getting involved in a fight with a boy is another point to be noted as a calm and obedient
girl is what the traditional patriarchal society demands. A girl is not meant to be strong physically but the society wants her to be strong in affection and caring the family.

The image of an ideal wife and a doting mother is portrayed in these films too. This is what the Indian audience are satisfied with. A total negligence of these stereotypical gender roles are still a distant reality in Indian cinema. The characters are once again presented distinctly Indian in outlook both in their conception and in the role they play in propelling the story. Indian films can never imagine a story line without upholding the image of a woman who is caring, steadfast in her devotion to the family, nurturing and upholding moral values.

Even when women achieve something in life through their own effort, they are constantly required to prove their worth to everyone around them, as opposed to the men who are not required to do that. The female protagonists in these films also encountered such problems mainly to get the consent from their family, partner, and society. Like any typical Indian woman, Mary Kom, Geeta and Babita in *Dangal*, and Kousalya in *Kanaa* once again become the victims of patriarchal domination. It is also seen that the crucial decisions in a woman's life mainly regarding their career, marriage and so on are taken by the male members of their family. Their voices are always being suppressed. Their likes and dislikes are not even heard or listened. The movie exposes an underlying message that Indian society is wrapped up in a thought that Indian women exist because of family and for the family. In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the views that she is to be given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. She is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop independent individual self. The decision in terms of her career or even marriage is taken by her father, brother or elder male member of family. To elucidate Simone de Beauvoir, marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to woman by society. The patriarchal practices which reduce women's status to inferior social beings are further perpetuated by myths and traditions which unfortunately have been embedded in the fabric of every society.

Breaking the gender stereotypes and empowering women are catchwords of female oriented movies or feminist counter films. But the day light reality is such films too tries to expose what our patriarchal society demands- keeping and following the traditional values intact. When analyzed closely, what can be seen is interplay between the opposing elements. The view of
introducing empowered woman as a model to the entire women world is contrasted with the same women who are denied of choosing her desired career, or like a typical women, who is always under the feet of patriarchal authorities such as father, husband or mentor. No wonder a married woman who takes her profession or academic career, too seriously is frowned upon. In Dangal, we see a typical patriarchal society where a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the views that she is to be given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. She is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood. As a way of escaping from 'marriage' the girls without their true consent, they followed the path of boxing, the father stamped on them. The female protagonists in these films too are undergoing the hegemonic parental pressure of becoming someone without her willingness. Thus it is evident that there is an unjust and unconscious conditioning of thoughts and perceptions of the society is copied too in films labeled as counter films. Again the popular media- cinema has perpetuated the idea of a woman being a liability. Like the cultural schemas that view marriage and motherhood as inevitable in every women's life, these films also throw light on the gendered expectations for women. Up to a certain extent, these movies are once again become the carriers of certain gender expectations.

Cinema is a medium which reflects the true mood and the changing scenario or rather the real face of the society which produces it. The picture of woman presented by the Indian cinema is changing in more than one sense. But at the same time, this change is presented along with the reaffirmation of conventional gender roles and the authoritative voice of patriarchal heads. Even though the counter films are trying to represent the voice of talent that is beyond gender, but along with this, they are again forced to showcase how a patriarchal Indian society be like and how it works. This shows that even though centuries have passed, the mindset of Indian society still remains unchanged, even if the society loud their voices on the need of empowering women.

Women have to be provided with strong role models who possess an individualistic identity is the need of the hour. The female protagonist in counter films must take the role of a mentor to help female audience in negotiating a unique position within the existing power structures. As an art form that upholds cultural values as well as inscribes positive cultural change, films have to change their mode of representing women's life apart from glorifying men if they had done some sacrifice for women. Rather than being an agent of male chauvinism, films should come up with a
unique narrative back story with the portrayal of women liberated from the clutches of patriarchal hegemony. Progressive cinema can become an apt tool for social change, a change for the better.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


