Gender Studies Assignment

Bollywood's contribution to rape culture through its portrayal of women

Dishi Gahlowt

BBA-2

It is no hidden fact that if we were to decide what would be the most representative of the heterogeneous mixture of traditions, beliefs, norms and lifestyles that India is, on a global platform, Bollywood, what we see synonymous with mainstream Indian Cinema, would take the cake. It accounts for our identity as a nation, something we hold very dear to our hearts. Our chest swells up with immense pride each time a Bollywood song is played on a foreign TV show or when our actors (and actresses- well, mostly actresses) receive offers to work in big Hollywood projects and gain recognition. The love for dance, drama and music is inherent in all Indians- and thus we are fully aware of what constitutes for a perfect Bollywood flick- with all its masala and emotions. Thus, needless to say, Bollywood forms a unified popular culture that we are all guilty of blindly following. So, how far can we go to say that it is also responsible for the bad things that happen in our country? Some blame Bollywood for objectifying it's women, while others blame Bollywood for encouraging women to wear short clothes and use mobile phones (which, apparently, is a wrong thing to do)- but clearly, the whole argument over women in or and Bollywood has been central in framing our perceptions and understanding of the current scenario pertaining to women in our country. Before I begin establishing facts and stating instances of the contribution of Bollywood to objectification, rape culture, patriarchy and misogyny, flawed ideals of beauty and masculinity et cetera et cetera- I would like to say that a lot of my beliefs and biases have found their way in the essay and are purely subjective.

The debate over the deteriorating condition of women in our country was brought to the forefront after the Nirbhaya gang rape case. It was when Indians finally realised that crimes against women- allow me to rephrase- heinous, horrible, disgusting and absolutely inhuman crimes against women were (and continue to be) on an all-time rise. This debate took many forms and things which had not been talked about or considered worth discussing previously were also incorporated within the ambit of this movement. Suddenly, we were openly discussing molestation, sexual exploitation, objectification, domestic violence, acid attacks, unwanted moral policing etc along with rapes, with the aim of eliminating these perils that hinged our society.

In a video released by an organisation called 'No Country For Women' in 2014, what came under scrutiny was how our movies were failing our women without even realising. The video went instantly viral and sparked discussions amongst the more educated, urban circles, about the need to question our filmmakers and how deeply imbibed in us are our regressive ideals that see women as mere sexual objects, incapable of having a voice and rights over their own bodies. I still remember watching the video for the first time and realising how I had never noticed the sexist intonations a lot of dialogues or lyrics of our favourite movies and songs had. While all this appears as harmless, tongue-in-cheek humour on the surface, it works on the mind level and there remains a residual thought somewhere in the back of our minds that it is okay to call women things and see their bodies as objects of sexual gratification. While of course, Bollywood does not explicitly condone sexual violence against women, it creates a culture that allows it. (Buzz feed, 2014)

Before we plunge into the Bollywood debate, we must note that it is not only Bollywood that is to be blamed. A lot of people believe that South Indian cinema, otherwise known as Tollywood or Kollywood is way worse. Leave alone Indian Cinema, even Hollywood has actively shown time and again in it's movies that women are meant to add the glamour quotient while the hero of the film is supposed to fight to rescue the world and the 'damsel in distress'. Thus, the culture that sees women as second class citizens who are only meant to be stay pretty and quiet is a worldwide problem we are trying to emerge out of. And we are simultaneously fighting against this biased and shallow portrayal of women by communication mediums such as films which hold immense ability to create and change opinions.

The Bechdel Test is often used by researchers to determine whether gender bias exists in a particular movie or not. It is simple yet the results it has shown when conducted over time are remarkable. The test is named after the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, in whose comic strip

Dykes to Watch Out For it first appeared in 1985.

For a movie to pass The Bechdel Test, it must contain just one thing — a scene in which two or more named female characters have a conversation (that is, back and forth dialogue) about *anything at all* besides men. Anything, even if it's something stereotypically feminine, like shopping or shoes.

Surprise surprise! Most of the movies, which include the most iconic Hollywood films of all times, fail this basic test. And some of them don't fail the test because the women in the film only discuss men, but because leading ladies are never even shown having a conversation in the film in the first place. Harry Potter, Avatar, The Lord of the Rings trilogy etc- they all fail the test for this reason.

So objectification comes later, what we are still struggling to find in our movies- Hollywood or Bollywood- are sensible conversations between women. Or any conversations at all!

If we apply the Bechdel Test in Bollywood movies, nearly every Bollywood movie fails the test. And we are not even talking about the movies that are outrageous in their approach of portraying women and their sexuality- like Grand Masti, Mastizade, Kya Kool Hai Hum (1/2/3)- we are discussing movies that we all have seen with our families and loved. Yeh Jawani Hai Deewani, Ram Leela, Bajirao Mastani, PK, 2 states- and the list is never ending. These movies are supposedly movies of the new, more progressive era- the one that apparently celebrates women and sees them as equals. So there are a bunch of 'equal' women- who only talk about men. The few movies that do pass the test, have women talking about shopping, family and household chores, while men discuss business, politics and world economics.

Have you ever heard the term 'dumb actresses'? Here is a little observation of my own. Go to a social media account of ANY model or actress, and look for a post that talks about anything even minutely unrelated to movies or fashion. A post with a message as simple as 'go vote' has at least one comment that says- "You are a dumb actress and you should just stick to movies". Yes, this is sad-also because there is no term such as a 'dumb actor' (barring some exceptions where people use way worse terms for Uday Chopra and Tusshar Kapoor) but even actresses are equally responsible for these sad state of affairs. They continue to propagate the idea, while some of them strongly voice their opinion against the unjustified unequal gender pay disparity, that as opinion leaders they can only discuss fashion, movies or beauty. When they are asked about topics that are relevant (No, not who is the President of India) but whether they consider themselves 'feminists' or not, even highly educated mainstream actresses like Parineeti Chopra say, and I quote, "I do feel proud of my gender, of being a woman. I do speak against gender inequality. I am the brand ambassador for Haryana's 'Beti Bachao Beti Padao' campaign. And I think it is very important for me personally to strive for

equality, especially the industry that I come from. But I'd rather be a role model than a feminist. I am very often confused to be a feminist but I am not. I am really not." Okay, first of all, Miss Chopra, you could have JUST googled 'feminism'. Seriously.

Obviously, male actors are not subjected to even half the criticism that these actresses face after making such disastrous statements (Everybody remembers Alia Bhatt's blunder, but we all conveniently seemed to forget Varun Dhawan's equally disturbing fiasco, made at the same time, in the same situation). Alia Bhatt is reminded again and again that she is a 'bimbo' and that she should pick up a newspaper while Varun Dhawan is left unbothered. However, if the prevailing conditions in the society are so unjust and biased, these actresses need to make a conscious effort to change them, to raise their voice and use their privileged position to rectify the situation as the primary victims.

Whenever I try to take a neutral stand on this situation, a voice inside me tells me that I cannot expect everyone to have general knowledge, and to not be 'dumb'. Of course, I cannot. But another conflicting voice from inside me asks that are public figures not supposed to be responsible? Honey, it sure is good that you're pretty and you are famous, but so many young girls see you as role models and idols, and you cannot possibly teach them that there is nothing more to them than their bodies and their hair. You know what they say, with great power comes great responsibility. Nobody is asking you to solve mathematical equations on a board, all we are asking for is a cautious exercise of this responsibility.

Of course, not ALL actresses shy away from openly expressing their opinion of socially and otherwise relevant issues. Kalki Koechlin, Konkona Sen and Nandita Das are some examples of actresses who are brave enough to voice their disappointment over gender related issues and unrealistic beauty standards set for women. While adjectives like strong and opinionated are often used to describe them, they are also thrown under the category of 'niche'- they do movies meant for the 'niche' audience, they are actresses only for a 'niche' population etc. If we connect the dots, it is possible that mainstream actresses are scared of getting attached to such labels that can make them lose their popularity. Maybe if they associate themselves with strong words such as feminism, they lose their likeability amongst the majority of men in the country, who see the upliftment of women and rise of movements such as these as a potential threat to their capabilities and masculinity.

So here I laid down the first reason as to how Bollywood is degrading it's women- not through the movies it makes, but because of how everybody within and outside of the industry sees the women in Bollywood. Unfortunately, the women themselves are equally guilty of reducing themselves to mere sexually attractive bodies, incapable of having a logical opinion on things that are significant and addressing important issues.

However, this is a very minute area of the entire problem. Let's now move to a bigger area- the portrayal of women in Bollywood films.

The portrayal of women in Indian cinema is showing some encouraging signs of improvement. Off late, we have had films like Pink and Queen which speak for the liberation of women from the shackles of the society and even celebrate women. But, as top Indian director Mira Nair put it, and I quote, "A lot of our films go down the same old stereotype. When there's a sexy babe she has to gyrate and she has to be an object of great allure and sex appeal and almost I would say vulgarity."

Most of our most loved films somewhere go through the same storyline- boy meets girl, falls in love, stalks her and harasses her till she gives up and finally falls in love with him back. Even the most iconic movies like Sholay and Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge have this plot. In Sholay, there is one sequence in which Hema Malini very strongly rebuffs the aggressive advances of Dharmendra. Eventually she

succumbs and the impression is given that although she was saying 'no', what she meant was 'yes'. If our movies are meant to be a reflection of the reality and hold a mirror to the society, may I know in which world is a girl turned on by the idea of a creepy, possibly crazy stalker?

Similarly, in DDLJ, Shah Rukh Khan plays an NRI brat who cannot take no for an answer. He follows Kajol, grabs her arms and harasses her with his friends. She pushes him, struggles out of his entrapment and shouts at him- all the effort to finally give in to his affections. Again, the movie imparts the message that when she says no, molest her further because what she really means is yes. She is an object that is to be conquered by all means.

In the more recent movie *Ranjhana*, even though the character of Sonam Kapoor, Zoya, made it a point to declare Dhanush's character, Kundan's one sided love and the consequent stalking 'harassment' and not appreciable at all, he was still glorified in the movie. The audience sympathised with him and rooted for him till the end, and saw Sonam Kapoor's character detestable for the simple reason that she did not reciprocate the love the innocent bloke had for her. Well, the audience is not entirely to be blamed because Zoya does not hesitate to use his feelings for her against him, and gets him to do her chores. Clearly, there is a subliminal reinforcement of the two notions that first of all, girls lure men to use them, and secondly, that by asking for favours, she was asking for the delirious obsession that accompanied them.

"What sort of a signal is the film sending out to all those misguided romeos who think it is perfectly okay to fling acid on a girl's face for having the gal to reject romantic overtures and improper attention?" (Shobhaa De, TOI 2013)

All we common girls desire for is an accurate representation of the dangerous social crime that stalking is. Being a victim myself, I assure all the filmmakers that it is nothing even remotely close to 'romantic' or 'attractive'.

Worst of all are the so-called sex comedies. Oh, how they make my blood boil! The double meaning dialogues that are intended to be funny, the eve teasing and the horrible representations of sex are plain sickening. Sex comedies are also made in Hollywood, but Bollywood has made it a point to only ridicule women and their bodies in these. The actors ogle at the breasts and buttocks of the women that the cameras zoom in and zoom out of, when the scantily clad woman walks or talks, unaware and totally innocent. In a country like India where sex and sexuality is not discussed openly, it is easy to imagine the kind of sexual frustration and expectations such movies give rise to.

*"I think the one thing we can say for sure is that we've practically internalized the degradation of women, which is why when it appears in comedies like Grand Masti, people laugh and enjoy it without actually processing that this has an effect and/or reflection in real life." (*Deepanjana Pal, Buzzfeed, 2014)

Another point that must be discussed is the flawed representation of the men in these movies. Bollywood's male protagonists are charged with machismo and aggression, and characterized by violence. They are super humans who are out there to fight a battle and claim their prize- the damsel in distress- the female protagonist of the movie. They are always in full control of their emotions and they are the only ones who are capable of using this wonderful gift of god given to us, what we call a brain, when their beloved is crying in a pool of tears, helpless and desperate for affection.

Unlike their male counterparts, female roles are always seen in movies in relation to the men in their lives. They are someone's daughter, someone's wife, someone's girlfriend and someone's mother. The villain of the movie still holds the ridiculous idea (that dates from the times of partition) that to humiliate and take revenge from the hero, he must violate his woman. So the villain must kidnap the

heroine, sexually abuse her or harm her in some other way to put his point across. Recent examples include almost all of Tiger Shroff movies.

Salman Khan, the mega star is known for his popularity amongst the common Indian masses. His films are instant hits in single screens, and the majority of young men in India worship him and aspire to be him. They embody his characters' sense of style and blindly follow his footsteps. Women drool over his persona and charisma. But not all people seem to think that he is as admirable. A Quora user posted a question on the website that said- **"Why do intelligent and highly educated people hate Salman Khan's movies?".**
The post was filled with people giving a variety of reasons as to why they thought "intelligent" and "sensible" people had a disliking for Salman Khan movies- and most of them stated the inherent 'sexism' in those movies as a primary reason. I am not sure if it a class and education based issue and has a direct correlation with "intelligibility", but he sure is not doing a very good job for someone who is responsible to so many young boys as their idol. As such a big star, it is plain sad that his movies are excessively garnished with sexist and regressive dialogues and scenes. The actresses are good looking pieces of meat that he feels no shame passing lewd comments at (*Aisi type ki ladkiyan hum jaise ladko ko dikhane ke liye hi aise cheezein karti hain,* Wanted, 2010). The movies only seem to glorify his high levels of testosterone, demeaning women on the clothes they wear, the way they walk and the way they talk. Of course, Salman Khan is not the only culprit. Shah Rukh Khan and even Amir Khan have given us some terrible movies with the most deplorable female characters. Clearly, there is no strict sense of morality they feel they must adhere to when it comes to portrayal of their female counterparts in their movies.

Pink, a critically acclaimed movie that was released recently, raised very important points about the concept of 'consent' and the rights of women to exercise the option of consent available to them to turn down the sexual advances made towards them by men. What it got wrong, however, was the underlying idea that eventually a man has to come to the rescue of a bunch of helpless women and speak on their behalf. However, that is just one way to look at it. It could also mean that not all men are the same, and that there are a lot of men that are willing to fight the society that represses its women with the women.

To be fair though, we have to give some movies their due share of credit. There are some movies that even though are not women-centric, do well in the area of portrayal of modern day relationships, where women are equals. Biggest shocker? They come from the house of Dharma, which rarely makes a film that has no shades of sexism. Ekk Main aur Ekk Tu, Hasee toh Phassee and 2 States, irrespective of how they were as films, did a decent job at capturing the essence of the modern working Indian woman, who is also tied to a family and a man, and the modern Indian 'common' man, that is equally if not more emotional, confused and, well, normal. The boy may be unrealistically loaded with money and Armani shoes, but to say the least, he is unarguably the closest to what we call 'one of us'. He does not have a superiority complex and he is scared to pick up fights. He is discovering himself in the process, just like the girl. In my opinion, even if such movies are not talking about liberating women directly or preaching equality, what they are doing right is showing us how it is so easy to love and respect a fierce, strong headed and independent woman. At many points in the movie, these women are labelled as 'crazy' or 'too much to handle' by the supporting characters for being even slightly different from the ideal *bahu* types, but the leading couple is unaffected and unafraid. These movies set an example of how it is possible to create love stories that do not rely on the chivalry and the strength of the hero to work, but simply on the more plausible and likely-to-happen-in-real-life storylines. Both the hero and the heroine cry when they are separated, they both are happy to see

each other excel in their work, and they both fear failure, heartbreak and the judgment of their families. I am going to paste a blogger's take on one of the movies, Hasee toh Phasee below.

*"**Hasee Toh Phasee** is connected with feminism owing to its main female protagonist who is unconventional and follows her head and heart even if it involves breaking barriers and taking risks. And not afraid to make the first move, she finds love in the process. The thrust is that feminism does not indicate that men and women exist in isolation, always competing. They can provide comfort and support to one another. The man in Meeta's life is not a sexist. He appreciates her uniqueness just as she values his. They support each other. And it is important to note that a character such as Meeta is not dismissed as a freak because of her high intellect and her unusual and footloose nature. She is celebrated for who she is. The film is as much a love story as it is the tale of a spunky woman and how she finds happiness. Meeta of* **Hasee Toh Phasee** *does not start a movement, neither is she an activist. She is a sensitive, intelligent female, and an individual who fails to give up on her theories and dreams."*

Source:
https://ofallwritingandtalkingmovingpictures.wordpress.com/2015/09/14/strengthening-identity-and-choosing-freedom-queen-and-hasee-toh-phasee-part-two-of-four/

Thank you for restoring our faith in Bollywood, in ways we could never imagine. Hence, it would not be right to say that ALL Bollywood films are contributing to the problem. A lot of them are also, knowingly or unknowingly, helping us normalise the concept of happy and liberated women, supported by the men in their lives.

Now coming to the movies that are intended to make a change in how we perceive the identity of a woman, I am going to discuss two so-called "women-centric" films. But before I begin, I don't understand why there is no such thing as a "men-centric" film because most of the films could come under that category, while these are just novelties.

My favourite "women-centric" Bollywood film of all times has to be Queen, the reason for which is simple. The protagonist, Rani, is not some revolutionary, blunt or aggressive woman (not there is anything wrong with it), shoving her liberalist ideals in your face. Instead, the movie shows her transition from a shy, inhibited and under confident woman to a confident and independent woman, who learns to live her life on her own terms. The movie is funny, thoughtful and gripping. The best of all, it is realistic and it is relatable. We all know a Rani, there is a Rani in all of us. Queen is another example of how movies can deliver strong messages regarding women empowerment without being over-the-top preachy.

Another movie that was a game changer was Kahani. It also did not speak volumes for women empowerment and the need to free women from the society that dominates them and looks down upon them. It was the story of a simple woman who wanted to avenge her husband's death. She was not doing unrealistic action scenes or fighting unnecessary battles. No emphasis was placed on the lead character's physical strength. The movie relied entirely on the fine acting of the cast members and the plot. Then why was it categorised under the "women-centric" section? Maybe because there was no male protagonist. More importantly, because it captured the essence of the less talked about "common Indian woman" who is capable of maintaining her own feisty and fiery self in a chaotic world, grappling against the injustices meted out to her.

Here I end the discussion about another important point- the portrayal of women in Bollywood. A lot of people are of the opinion that since these factors are not directly responsible for crimes against women, therefore they are not important or worth the debate. We need to stop seeing rape as only

a sexual crime because it is much more than that. Like my teacher once told us, rape is a political statement. It is the declaration of the sick mentality that sees women as unworthy of being treated as equals. The perpetrators of these crimes believe that women have to be tamed and kept under control, and sexual violation of their bodies is the only way to send their messages across. To combat this mind set, we have to change the stereotypes associated with women, and thus, we have to start at the grass root level. Only when our films begin depicting women how they depict men, and stop depicting men as meta-humans, we will know that we have evolved as a society. Bollywood movie scripts are receptors- they are based on the reality that they absorb, and further amplify it multiple times to billions of people through a screen. While they may not directly communicate with their audience, they possess the ability (and the responsibility) to show the society not only what it is, but also what it could be.

The last and the most controversial, talked about manner in which Bollywood contributes to rape culture is through 'item songs', that are exclusive to Indian movies. The hypersexualised lyrics paint women as a tease, while the visuals have women dancing in revealing clothes in a crowd of drunk men, leering at them with lusty eyes. Even though these songs have usually no connection to the plot whatsoever, they are added in the movies to attract crowds. They glorify the commodification of women through their derogatory lyrics and disturbing picturisation. Let me write some lyrics taken from different item songs below.

"Main toh tandoori murgi hun yaar, gatka le saiyan alcohol se"

"Mumbai ki na Dilliwalon ki, Pinky hai paisewalon ki."

"'Palu ke neeche chupake rakha hai udadoon toh hungama ho"

"Aankhon se kyun sekein, haaton se kar manmani"

The list is endless. On the pretense of entertaining the audience, filmmakers use these titillating item songs. Until and unless they don't see anything wrong with the inclusion of such songs in their movies, the problem cannot be solved. In the video released by No Country For Women, a bunch of young guys were surveyed and they felt no shame in admitting that women wear short clothes to lure men. What makes them think so? '"*We see it in these songs and so we know*"' was the answer.

*"The most popular item songs depict a naughty village girl – playing up the "Munni" and "Chameli" fantasy. In a country where the majority of the population is rural, showing sexy village girls is inherently problematic. Rather than inspiring social change for women to be truly sexually empowered, these songs perpetuate the culture of misogyny that has shackled Indian women for years." (*Forbes magazine, 2014)

To conclude my essay, I would like to say that what needs to change is the mind-set of the people making these movies. They should take account of the grave responsibility that has been placed over their shoulders instead of avoiding answerability. At the same time, it is good that we have started discussing taboos like sex and sexuality in our movies, but care has to be so taken that they are discussed through the gender lens. Sex comedies can also be made without the abasement of women's bodies. Improbable and absurd portrayal of both men and women has to be taken down a notch and power relations between the two (and more) genders have to be represented more accurately.

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