

Article

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## The Fire of Tiger's Claw: A Peep into The Mystified Theory of Feminism in Indian Cinema



Let us start with a question. Do we inherently consider woman or girl as a weaker entity – or inferior, to an extent?

According to Indian scriptures, during the act of lovemaking, women were barred from getting up on the body of her male companion. Later, though they were permitted (?) to do the so, a waist chain comprising of some tiny bells was tied around a woman's lower belly as an ornament naming it *Kamarbandh*. Throughout the years, a legend passed on that the woman whose *Kamarbandh* made least sound or no sound at all during intercourse had the expertise to satisfy her husband to the fullest!

In Burma and Thailand, women of the Kayan Lahwi tribe are known for wearing neck rings, brass coils that are placed around the neck, apparently to lengthen the neck. It is believed that this practice defended the women from wild animal attacks as well as from the licentious eyes of the males from other tribes. It is worth mentioning that in 1930s, Lahwi wom-

en became so popular in Britain's circus parties that the parties made huge profits out of those necks.

The movie *Thappad* (2020) begins with conversations of three couples. Three different psychological, economic, and social statuses they represent. All three women have their own issues and struggles, and they are surviving through these, with an "ice-candy" in one hand: deteriorating life in one hand and romanticism in the other.

Undoubtedly the origin and the definition of feminism rose from something more serious and important than *Kamarbandh*, European Corset and longer neck etc. As feminism stands for the equal rights for women, it is itself a discriminatory belief. Because when one species has all the favourable reasons to be innately equal or even better than the other, why do we pull them back to ascertain their "equal rights"! Or feminism itself is a delusion. From 1884 to 2020, numerous laws have been amended, chains broken, yet women are

still not free from psychological slavery.



In *Gumrah* (1963), Ashok Kumar said to Mala Sinha, “You have crossed the *Lakshman Rekha* of the house. No woman has the authority to do the same because women represent the home. If her character got contaminated, the entire generation collapses.” B. R. Chopra, the flag-bearer of Indian culture in television show, was the maker of this film. The definition of contaminated character explained by Chopra is at its lowest. However, we have crossed a far path from that version of *Stree* to today’s “no means no” (*Pink*, 2016).

Frida Kahlo, a differently abled Mexican painter once said, “Feet, why do I need you when I have wings to fly?” That very woman once being told by her lover Diego Rivera,

- Thank you.

- For what?

- For making a fat, old, crazy communist a happy man.

- Do not think I am going to sleep with you just because you took me under your wing.

- Before you came along, I was painting murals and womanising in peace.

The couple broke up in the later phase of their lives. (*Frida*, 2002)

There is a huge difference between the representations of feminism in Indian films to that in the western films. The fundamental difference is economical and sociological. Male sovereign social structure is imprinted

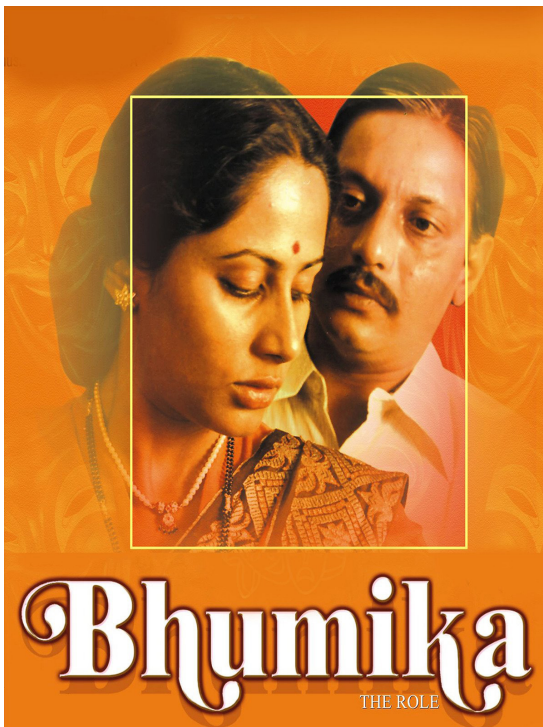
everywhere and burdens the storytelling process. But, in the west, films are talking about their very personal needs, desires of women from the point of view of a woman. They are concerned about their ambitions and passions, and value them as well. Films that reflect that sense are *Monalisa Smile* (2003), *Little Women* (1994), *The Piano* (1993), *Wild* (2014), *Roma* (2018), and many more.

The factors that seem to be triggering feminism are deprivation of love, respect, and self-esteem. Sexual desire can be categorised as a part of the desire to be loved. Women are still not quite loud about their physical needs, although in ancient time they sought help from other man if needed. Pandava’s birth saga is an eminent example of this kind of hypocrisy where the scriptures and epics have covered up man’s impotency and women’s desire through the gigantic myths and denunciations of dharma. Indian films can be categorised more as illustrations of womanhood and their larger than life roles of being a mother or wife rather than representing feminism. Very few films are there which tried to speak from the point of view of a woman, and they also fail to sustain audience’s interest due to poor technical production and self-proclaimed ideologies.

Throughout the years whether it is mythologies or epics and religious scriptures, women are playing either the role of the victim or the second fiddle only. They have never been the narrator (the leader) of the story. If we look at *Ramayana*, all the chase of Rama is for his loving wife Sita, but Sita has never been the leading character of the story. Just after re-establishing the vigour and generosity of Lord Rama, the narrator had disposed her inside the mother earth. In *Mardani* (2014), the female IPS character enacted by Rani Mukherjee is as loud and clear as her character should be. It will not cross your mind for a fraction of second that we are missing an octane-driven male character instead of Rani here. But the sequel of the film *Mardani-2* (2019) does not

seem to be that much rational but more of a feminist campaign. This is how a film on feminist voice loses its grip when its usage of the 'ism' is ornamental but not of flesh and blood.

In the pool of melodramatic and moral based women centric movies in India, few films that really try to pop up are *Bhumika* (1977), *Lajja* (2001), *Mrityudand* (1997), *Fire* (1996), *Dor* (2006), *Queen* (2013), *Akira* (2016), *English-Vinglish* (2012), *Lipstick Under my Burkha* (2016), *Pearched* (2015), *Pink* (2016), etc. Besides, there are some films that we cannot term as work on feminism; but these films have remarkable women characters i.e. *Kahaani* (2012), *NH10* (2015), *Astitwa* (2000), *Arth* (1982), *Guide* (1965), and *Mother India* (1957).



From *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) to recent times, the lead women characters of Indian Cinema can be categorised into two classes. Since 1950 they were either wife or a prostitute. After that till 90's, women got a new label, an urban love interest of the lead. Most of the time, these urban women were sorted as shallow groupies. The intoxicated audience could not even see that when Amitabh Bacchan, being the saviour of the oppressed and prime icon of motherly love, had the dialogues like, "Tumhari jaise ladki apna naam

*kapdo kitarha badalti hain*" (*Deewar*, 1975). Except the parallel cinemas, the female characters were generally glamorous, needy, and fragile. Imtiaz Ali's *Jab We Met* (2007) was a film which spontaneously represented the characteristics of a woman of this century after an exceptionally long time. The theme and characterisation of *Lajja* and *Mrityudand* were also praiseworthy, but they lack cinematic appeal due to expansion of melodrama. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* had spoken about the sexuality and desires of a woman and no doubt was a remarkable film of that time, but it seemed to be curated by sex as mere driving force. Hence the characters' psyche did not get the proper exploration and audience too could not connect to the film very well.



Revenge had always been a popular theme of Indian cinema. Though this kind of cinema patronises masculinity, there have been some films in 1980s where women were portrayed in the lead roles. The story of these women-centric films originated from three basic factors: gender discrimination, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Though domestic violence is just in the blood of Indian male, not many films have been made based on that theme. *Daman* (2001), *Agnishakshi* (1996) and *Raja Kiaayegi Baraat* (1997) are a few films to be mentioned. *Provoked* (2006) and *Videsh* (2008) are two films made by NRI filmmakers like Deepa Mehta and Jagmundra. Other films on this theme are *Pratighaat* (1987), *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988), *Sherni* (1988), *Phool Baney Angarey* (1991), and *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* (1980).

From the primitive ages of human civilisation,



there seem to be three fundamental causes of every problem – religion, community, and gender discrimination. Every genre of film opposes the oppression against women, but if you take a deep look into films, you will see how hypocrite these films are:



1. In scenes of war and action of the muscle, the blood-soaked characters shown are either women or children.
2. Abundance of scenes with women having bath and changing clothes.
3. Ghost/spirits/bad guys chase and threaten only the woman character.
4. The films that advocate justice for a raped woman do also have a longer scene of the whole incident of molestation and so on.

5. If a woman cries for help – “*Bachao bachao*” or “*Mujhe bhagwan ke liye chor do*” – then also the villain comes with a horrendous dialogue saying, “*Tujhe agar bhagwan ke liye chor diya to mera kya hoga!*”

Even the target of these jokes, cracked on silly dialogues of Bollywood, is also women. Rajkumar Santoshi’s most acclaimed film *Damini* (1993) is considered as one of the most pioneer film on justice for women. But the rape scene and the debates inside the courtroom are not lesser than mental and sexual torture and erotic violence at any cost. From establishing women’s existence and self-esteem, as in *Queen* (2013) and *Pink* (2016) where the abandoned protagonist enjoys her honeymoon all alone by herself, or even divorced a

husband just for a slap, the narrative pointed out at different crises of womanhood. But the root of these problems seems to be one – the monotonous role of a woman in a family/society whether we respect her as a mother, or exploit her as a caretaker, or use her as a sex object. While an inherent desire to prove her as the best among others continuously rules a woman’s mind, to be the master of his woman seems to be the outward obsession in the men’s psyche. These causes lead to misogynistic and misandrist state of minds in opposite directions.



In an interview filmmaker Kalpana Lajmi was asked whether she was feminist? She answered, “I don’t know if I am. But definitely I am a humanist”. Lajmi’s answer and internal causes of feminism have become quite loud and clear in the film *Thappad* (2020). It was expected that Anubhav Sinha’s *Thappad* will fall in the same place as of his two previous films which were issue-based but one-sided murmur. But it was not. *Thappad* remained alive just because of its confident narrator. The protagonist was expected to be a misandrist who is vocal against the never-ending oppression by patriarchal society around the world, but she is not. The rhythm is maintained in the entire film, uncovering each and every layer of our hypocrite ultra-modern, highly educated society which imposes the sense that a woman or girl should compromise for the family values, she should be *sanskari*, and a slap on her face is not a thing to merit a conversation at all.

The definition of feminism should not be generalised by shouting slogans against the injustice towards women. Feminism is not only

about the atrocities meted out to women; it is about herself, everything about herself. Films like *English-Vinglish*, *Raazi*, and *Akira* had talked about the completeness of womanhood, the beauty and strength of her kind. The recent venture *Thappad* has proved that the idea behind feminism and writing a woman character as lead is gradually changing and becoming convincing in Indian cinema. This might not be a pioneer film that strengthens the ground of feminism in modern India, but the endeavour surely makes us pause for a moment and

compels to think why only a woman has to justify her role whether she is Black Mamba, Sita or Pakeezah.

**Note:** The tiger's claw is referred here as Indian Coral/Tiger's Claw flower. There is a popular Assamese song of Dr Bhupen Hazarika "*Modarore phool...*" which tells that Modar flower (tiger's claw) is barred from use in holy religious acts like *puja* or prayer, as because this flower is considered profane.

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