



A Study on ‘Women-Centric Films: Are they Improving Status of Women in Society?’

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Abstract : *The main aim of the study is to explain whether women-centric films in Bollywood have really helped to improve the status of women in society. There is an assumption that the very word ‘woman’ brings to mind an entity that can seduce with sensual beauty, endure with inner mind control and mould to any situation as though born to handle just that. Most of the movies treat women in the typical patriarchal way—they are either angels or devils. However, there are a few examples where filmmakers have allowed women characters to take a stand, without caring about the*

norms or society like Kahani, Chak de India, Astitva, Nil Battey Sannata.

How a society treats its women is one of the strongest indicators of the success and health of that society. This research is bringing out the problems and concerns about the portrayal of women and their improving status in society. The main aim of this research is to understand the portrayal of women in such films that encourage social change in the treatment of women in Indian society, which is largely male-dominated and patriarchal. Therefore, by acknowledging the open secrets like domestic violence, abuse, etc., it brings these problems upfront, by allowing women to talk about it in public and portraying women as emotionally and financially independent.

Through this research we were able to know that the ratio of women-centric films has surely gone high but the mindset of people is still the same. Even though people have started watching women-centric films, most of the people think that women are still used as means of attraction in the films. The findings revealed that neither the status of women has improved enough nor their perception has changed much. It’s an alarming situation as neither the local nor the national media is talking about upgrading women-centric films. It’s time that we should encouraged the efforts that are made while producing women-centric films and bring a positive change in the society.

Keywords: *Bollywood films, women centric films, patriarchal, norms, stereotyped, bias.*

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Introduction :

“Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth.” – Pablo Picasso

Bollywood, the industry that deals with the art of bringing life to 70mm screen, is also a mirror of our society.

Bollywood has been notorious for its ill-treatment of portrayal of women characters. Over the years, women portraying central characters in Bollywood films have been few and far between. Those portrayals, including the protagonists, are rarely holistic and mostly subject to ingrained biases. Different features like occupations, introduction of cast in text, associated actions, and descriptions are captured to show the pervasiveness of gender bias and stereotype in movies.

Women characters are mostly described with surface level qualities, attractive, beautiful whereas men are represented as “strong” and “successful” associated with them. Verbs like “kills” and “shoots” occur with men while verbs like “marries” and “loves” are associated with women.

Hindi films portray women as “ideal women” as submissive, self-sacrificing, and controlled, while the “bad” woman is individualistic, sexually aggressive, westernised and not sacrificing. While descriptors for men are profession driven, women are associated with decorative words such as physical appearances, emotional states, or their relation to a man, such as the “wife of” or “daughter of”. Despite trivialising their roles, filmmakers don’t hesitate to use women as bait in luring audiences to theatres.

Bollywood has seldom failed us when it comes to drama. When depicting heightened emotions and the depth of humanity, stories can be fetched from the diversity of cultures, history, and varying levels of society. What remains almost unchanged, is the sexism that is deeply rooted in our people, no matter the culture, history, or social status. Time and again, filmmakers have told stories about women in this oppressive societies; women who refuse to be fettered by the norms, and women who tried to bring a change into their own worlds. One cannot deny the fact that India is a male dominant country. The Indian film industry has been known as a place where women are treated as mannequins in films and limited to songs and dances. Most of our movies treat women in the typical common

place way they are either angels or devils. However, there are a few examples where filmmakers have allowed women characters to take a stand, without caring about norms or society. Bollywood has produced numerous films, which elevated the importance of women characters.

The days of the macho hero high on testosterone may not be over yet but actresses are definitely holding their own these days, asserting their rights, commanding their market price and playing title roles like never before. Gone are the days when an actress had to prance around trees as a customary glamorous prop in silly yet indispensable song sequences to justify her presence in a film. Now, roles are being specially written for them and producers are no longer fighting shy of investing in women-oriented movies. Above all, the audience is beginning to troop into theatres to cheer them as loudly as they did for the male leads in the past.

Objective

The research study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To know what is the role that women play in Hindi films and has it changed over the years? Women have mainly played decorative roles in Hindi cinema for a long time. Or, even in films where they had important roles, they are more victims and martyrs or victimizers of other women. Each decade has presented its own brand of women in Hindi cinema. Over past decades, Indian cinema has witnessed a significant transformation in the way women are portrayed through films. Contemporary films portray women as more independent, confident and career-oriented. The aim is to link the changing character played by women in films with the emerging status of women in India, as films are a reflection of changes in the social structure.
- To observe the changing response & behaviour of all the age groups to the changing trends in the film industry about women-centric Hindi films. Some still portray women as the weakest element of the society, and some as an essential element of the society. As societies entered the world of modernization, the role of women changed

dramatically. But still the change of images has not been a sudden one but happened slowly. The debate whether films reflect life or life imitates films can also be examined in this context. Despite a large number of women working both in urban and rural areas, the films more often ignore this reality. Seeing women's portrayal in popular cinema, it seems time has been still for her. Even though the characterization is more detailed the role has not changed drastically. The roles assigned to heroines still carry the stereotypes.

- The third was to analyze the situation of the audience, especially from the lower strata, who are unable to watch films with the growing multiplex culture. Women-centric films are always shown in urban areas, When we talk about rural areas, they are not able to get the information what they should get from the women-centric films due to high cost of tickets.

Hypothesis :

One cannot deny the fact that India is a male dominant country. Indian film industry has been known as a place where women are treated as mannequins in films and limited to songs and dances. Yet, Bollywood has produced numerous films, which elevated the importance of women characters. Movies like '**Mother India**' which came in **1957** was one of the cult classics of Indian cinema and the first women-centric film directed by Mehboob Khan. The film elevated the strength of women where the legendary actress Nargis essayed her role to the perfection. **Arth (1982)** showed Shabana Azmi's tremendous acting skills which mesmerised the audience where the main plot of the story is about extra-marital affairs. She made the audience deeply connect with the flick with her strong feminine character.

- The hypothesis is quite interesting –It is to know the truth about changing status of women by film in our society.
- It is hypothesized that even though a filmmaker wants to work on any women-centric issue, the response that such films get in our society are really very disheartening and it totally demotivates the cast and crew of the film to continue working on such stories.

It is hypothesized that directors don't want to spend more budget on it. Even actresses don't show much interest in such movies and just for the sake of more money and fame they also prefer to work with top class actors. The major players in this business are producers who are just minting money at the cost of selling this culture, people and their souls.

Today, it is not just about roping in stars but also getting in equality for women in a film and society.

Scope of the study :

The study is exploratory in nature and seeks to identify the changing status of women in the society with the rise of women-centric films. This study also aims to show that the glass ceiling has finally been smashed, as heroines have evolved into the new heroes in new-age Bollywood.

The study was conducted within the nation. People covered for the study included male and female actors and audiences as well. Primary data was collected from 111 women and 89 men. We contacted various people from the field concerned all over India and also selected those viewers who were staunch addicts of watching movies, to receive a balance response.

Limitations :

Few samples were from lower strata so it was not appropriate to use advanced psychometric techniques for study. So, a simple three point scale was used for data collection. Further research may explore other insights by using development in measuring tools and techniques to gain better insight. The research being a sample study has inherent limitations of sampling error and bias. The research is restricted to Patna alone. It didn't cover any other domain.

Theme of the study :

"Film as dream, film as music. No art passes our conscience in the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls."

– Ingmar Bergman

Changing mindset, talent and steady business have caused a spurt of women centric films in Bollywood. A noted Bollywood analyst Komal Nahta said that it was unthinkable to have so many films with female protagonist 10 to 15 years ago. "Then filmmakers considered it suicidal to invest in a women-centric project. But times have changed now." Just as Indian

society has set rules to define a fallen woman, our films too follow set rules for that stereotype.

Women in Bollywood films have not been given their fair share of author-backed roles. By and large, women characterisations have been sketchy or restricted to being arm-candy, her frailty in sharp contrast to male virility reinforcing the latter. The film industry, which is a male-dominated field, has always had a handful of films with women in the lead roles. The idea that a woman is the star of the film is often seen as an achievement in itself in the Bollywood film industry.

Research and methodology

Total Sample Size = 200	
150 samples Age group (10-25) = 74 (25-50) = 65 (50-75) = 11	Questionnaire (Urban youths were our priority for this survey).
20 samples	Interview
30 Samples	Focus Group Discussion

The research methodology that we included follows scheduling, interview and group discussion. Together there were 200 samples.

74 samples were taken ranging from 10-25 yrs, 65 from 25-50 yrs and 11 from 50-75 yrs people to know whether the condition of women in our society has actually changed after the emergence of various women-centric films? We did scheduling in different areas of Patna like Gardanibagh, Boring Road, Bailey Road, Gandhi Maidan and Ashok Rajpath. The scheduling was very interactive and we got to know opinions of various people. 25% of people actually take women-centric films seriously and do watch them but the irony is that after independence, more than 40 films have been released but yet there are just 7% people who have seen 20 or above women centric films while the ones who have watched below 5 are 45%. Also, we have analysed that 45% of people do think that women are still used as a means of attraction in the movies.

After the survey, we realized that the main reasons that women-centric movies are not working good on the Box office because of following reasons:—

- Poor content
- Women portrayed as object
- No profit

- Multiplex culture
- Inferiority complex

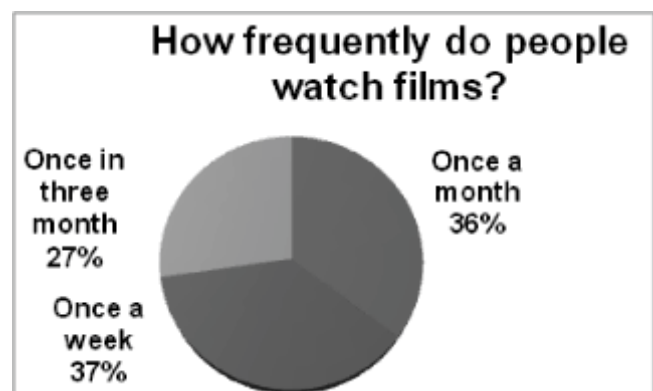
Then we interviewed 20 people left from the sample so that we can get a detailed viewpoint about the overall status of women in Bollywood and their changing perception in the society. In the interview, we got to know about the deep essence of people's opinion on women-centric films and their response, about which we would not have known just by the survey.

Then we did focus group discussion and there were 30 people left from our sample. The topic was "Are women-centric films actually helpful in improving the status of women?" We selected different areas of Patna and for 2 consecutive Sundays in the month of September we held a group discussion in the colonies of Kankarbagh and Mithapur. We found that people were not satisfied with the present condition of women in films. Still it is believed by many of them that women are presented as mannequins in films.

After the group discussion, we came to the conclusion that still there are many people who just want entertainment from the masala movies and the women-centric films make them feel bored. Some people also viewed women in films as they are for attracting the audience to the theatres and multiplexes raising the Box office collection. Some were also convinced and fought for the improving status of women these days in our society and Bollywood as well.

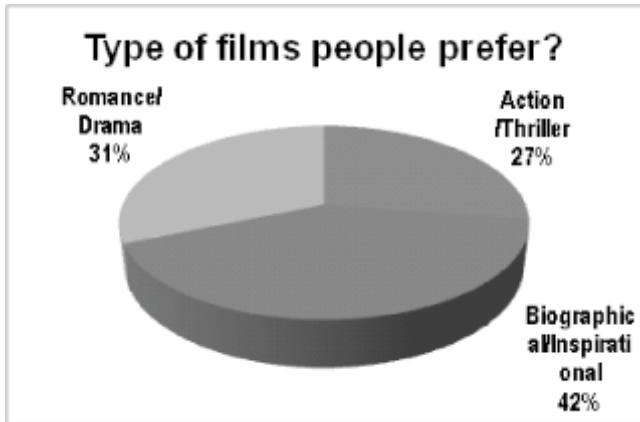
Data analysis and interpretation :

1. How frequently do you watch movies?
 - Once a week
 - Once a month
 - Once in 3 months.



2. Which type of movies do you prefer?

- Biographical/Inspirational
- Action/Thriller
- Romance/Drama



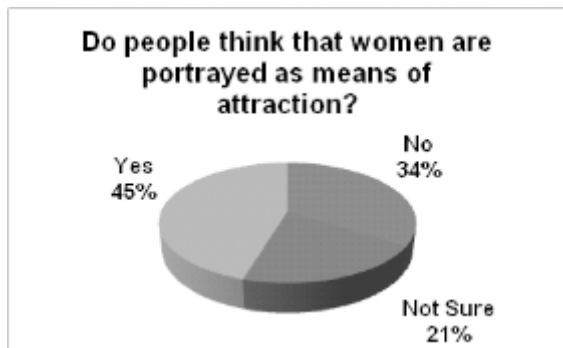
3. Does female protagonist in the movies influence you to take bold actions in your life?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes



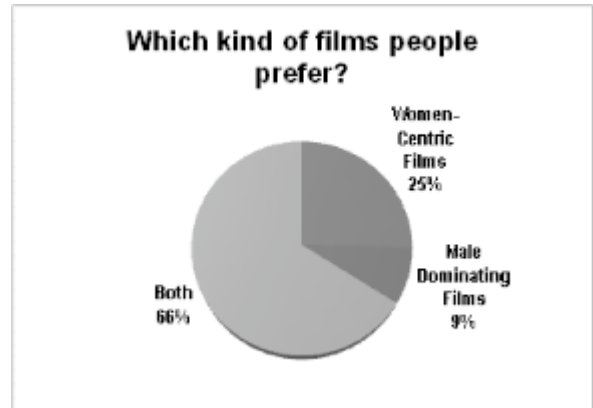
4. As per your opinion, do you think that women are portrayed only as means of attraction in the films?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure



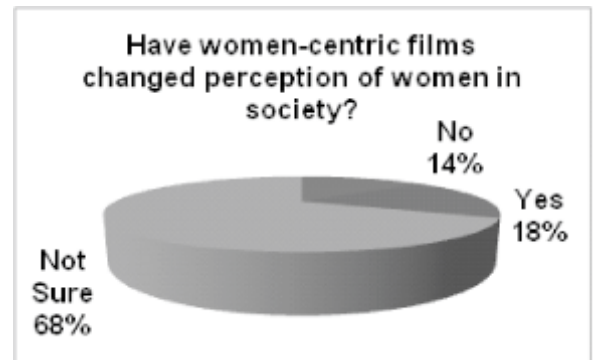
5. Do you prefer women-centric or male dominating films?

- Women-centric
- Male dominating
- Both



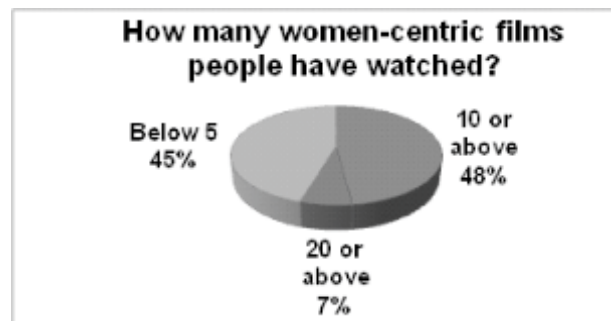
6. Have women-centric films changed the perception of women in society?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

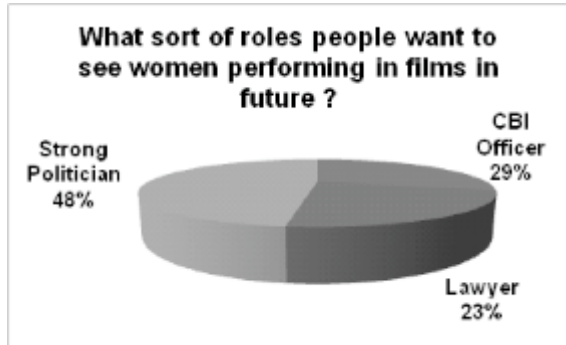


7. Till date, how many women -centric movies have you watched?

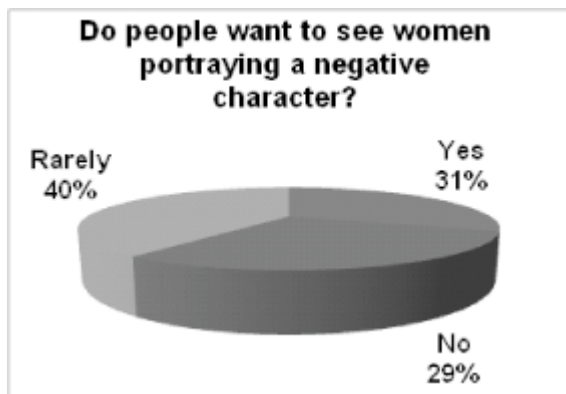
- Below 5
- 10 or above
- 20 or above



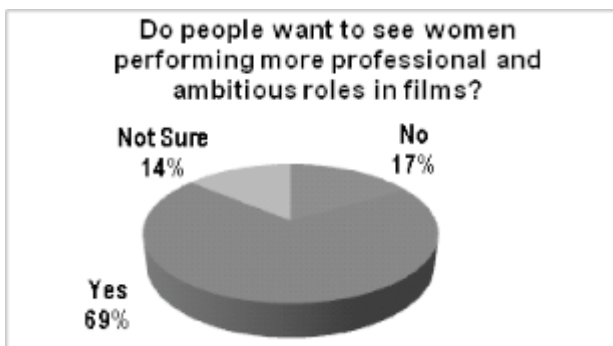
8. What sort of role would you wish to watch women performing in future?
- CBI officer
 - Lawyer
 - Strong politician



9. Would you prefer women portraying negative characters in films?
- Yes
 - No
 - Rarely



10. Do you think that women should be portrayed as a professional character in films, rather than always carrying out household activities?
- Yes
 - No
 - Not sure



Findings :

According to the survey conducted on the basis of our questionnaire, we found that the ratio of women-centric film in Bollywood has surely gone higher. But through the survey, we got to know that the mindset of some people is still the same as earlier times. Even though people have started watching women-centric films, but yet we have analysed that most of the people do think that women are still used as a means of attraction in the movie.

We also interviewed various people, through which we got to know about the deep essence of people's opinion on women centric films and their response, about which we would not have known just by the survey.

The findings were disheartening, revealing that the status of women has not improved enough, nor their perception has changed much. Some people also viewed women in films as a means of attracting the audience to the theatres and multiplexes raising the box-office collection.

Recommendations:

The number of women-centric films released in the past few years has come like a breath of fresh air. Their success shows Indian cinema's capability to challenge male-centric narratives, and that a heroine can carry a film on her shoulders too. Needless to say, the nuanced performances of the actors in the movies were outstanding, and each film had a concept that struck a chord with the issues that women from all backgrounds face. There is no doubt that these films were great. But with this new wave of actors and films challenging notions of patriarchy in the film industry and society in general, writers and directors in future need to take care not to equate empowerment with success, because that runs the danger of reducing the protagonists to validation seeking entities. It would mean that the whole purpose of empowerment has been defeated, because on one hand, we are encouraging women to rekindle their self-respect and value their individuality, and on the other hand, we are showing that such pursuits are successful in their true sense only when these women impress others. Given the far-reaching impact that such films have had in the past, it is important that films in the future celebrate the grit displayed by their female leads, with success being a part of the journey, and not the destination itself. There is no standard for judging the

achievement of the multitude of roles that a woman takes up in her life. The idea that empowerment comes only when a woman makes a mark in the outside world is faulty, because we are undermining the contribution of housewives who voluntarily take up the unrewarding job.

Conclusion:

Trends in Bollywood change but the stock stereotypes depicting women remain the same. Although Indian films are trying to break stereotypes and opting for innovative characters, the process has largely been slow. Despite a spate of several prominent female-oriented films offering meaty roles to heroines and several promising women filmmakers creating offbeat cinema in recent times, our films have rarely got rid of stereotypes. A number of mid-budget, women-centric Bollywood films released recently have failed commercially

Going by the number of releases starring female leads in the last few years, it could be said that Bollywood has had a certain burst of women-centric, 'feminist' films. Breaking away from the stereotypical portrayals of female characters in Hindi cinema, actresses from different generations—young and old alike—are outdoing each other not only in playing powerful, pivotal roles in these movies but also in carrying the projects entirely on their shoulders. In a brave, new-age showbiz, the beauties are no longer frail, and can very well hold on to the weight of box-office expectations with consummate ease—without the brawn of any saleable male star.

In what could be hailed as the most discerning change in post-millennial Hindi cinema, female actors are getting their due like never before. But is it for real or just a passing fad? Is the audience really ready and mature enough to accept the glut of such movies yet? Well, going by the fate of many such films released this year, it appears that it will take more time before Bollywood comes of age with regard to its women leads. The macho, often middle-aged, superstars who have been churning out Rs 100-crore hits almost on demand with or without the merit of their films remain the monarchs of the film industry. The commercial failure of these films has once again reinforced the belief that the audiences at large prefer a male-dominated movie. Except for a rare blockbuster like *Tanu Weds Manu*, which stormed into the Rs 100-crore club, otherwise

dominated by the Shahrukh-Salman-Aamir Khan triumvirate and Akshay Kumar, there have been only a few women-centric movies like *Dirty Picture* and *Neerja*, which have so far managed to cross the Rs 50-crore business mark. Taapsi Pannu's *Naam Shabana* earned around Rs 40 crore in the domestic circuit despite an extended cameo by superstar Akshay Kumar. Anushka Sharma's home production, *Phillauri* also failed to make it big. Film writer R. Mohan says many bad movies of big male stars have done phenomenal business over the years while several good movies of several actresses have flopped miserably.

There are, however, other reasons, poor content being a major one, for the failure of these films. Some believe that a surfeit of backward-looking movies is being made these days in the name of women empowerment films. However, a section of people insist that content is not the only reason for the flopping of such movies. They rue the fact that such films do not even get enough number of screens at the multiplexes at the time of their release.

We are eagerly waiting for the day when enlightened steps will come forward to encourage the women-centric Hindi films. This can happen only with the support of directors, actresses and audiences, so that it can be worth viewing again and again.

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