Representation of Masculinity in Popular Culture

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Masculinity can be defined as the properties, characteristic of the male sex or trait of behaving in ways considered typical for men. It refers to “socially produced but embodied ways of being male.” The idea of masculinity has been a contentious subject and invites immense possibility of research and development. Studies in masculinity should not be limited to its comparison with femininity and criticism, it’s high time that the idea should be studied and theorised independently. R W Connell’s work Masculinities (1993) is regarded as the pioneering work on the topic and in the text she talks about the plurality of masculinity and writes:

To recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on. (37)

The paper focuses on the representation of masculinity in popular culture, which in the contemporary scenario is not limited to Bollywood but extended to social networking platforms, such as: YouTube, sports, Television and media industry, politics and the list goes on. The representation of masculinity in these fields has not been uniform; in fact portraying the idea of masculinity with a single colour has been one of the shortcomings that has hampered the research and development in this field. Bombay cinema has always been a platform of great significance to trace the changing social order and at the same time it also plays a vital role in promoting, influencing and propagating various ideologies. Popular culture has a big role to play in the formulation and dissemination of various stereotypes in general and related to gender in particular in our society, especially through the figure of the hero/heroin in movies; specifically in Bollywood movies seen in the Indian context. In recent scenario, sports icons have also emerged as the harbingers of change on issues related to gender be it largely followed sports like Cricket or Tennis or something like Pro Kabaddi and Boxing. The players are making strong statements not only through their respective games but also through various activities both on and off the field. YouTube videos, blogs, WhatsApp texts, Facebook posts etc. have also emerged as potent mediums influencing gender equations. Personalities belonging to TV and media industry, news anchors, business tycoons and political figures all are responsible in rewriting the present state of multidimensional masculinities. However, we need to analyse these famous figures and popular mediums through the critical lens of society as the needs of the market that drive such constructions.

Understanding the basic tenets of masculinity and femininity goes a long way to understand the gendered stereotypes existing in our society. Gender stereotypes are rooted in dualism such as passive/assertive, strong/weak, gentle/forceful, and emotional/distant and they have become a significant part of our everyday language and understanding. The gender equation is still vibrant and visible in contemporary times through various mediums of communication like Media, Facebook, Twitter, Sports and of course Bollywood. The paper examines as to how the emergence of such mediums has helped in many ways to liberalise the gender imbalance and what role globalization is playing in changing the face of the Indian man, or if the ‘ghost’ of the past very much alive, penetrating into the millennium man through agencies the very society is responsible for creating. In the post-modern age the urban, millennial, twenty first century masculinity/femininity may serve as an answer that in all probability may lead to neutralise gender imbalances, these are some of the issues the paper attempts to investigate.

Representation of masculinity in popular culture, especially Bollywood keeps shifting. We have seen the era 1990s showcasing rugged, well built, angry young men etc. which changed to a suave form of masculinity which is urban, somewhat fragile, well-shaped body represented through movies like Jane Tu Ya Jane Na (2008) or Bachana Aae Hasino (2008). But the recent scenario has witnessed a variation; it’s a blend of both urban and rural form of masculinity. We have seen the arrival of certain old traits of masculinity as a part of popular culture. This paper tries to trace the changing face of masculinity through select Bollywood movies like Highway, Bajrangi Mastani(2015), Dum Laga Ke Haisha(2015), Gabbar is Back(2015), Ki and Ka (2016) and many more. The above movies project the idea of masculinity in their unique way.

Movies in present times owe their origin to various sources and one of the prominent sources is South Indian Film Industry. We witness lots of adaptation, appropriation and adulteration in recent Bollywood movies from south like Shingham(2011), Gabbar is Back(2015), Wanted(2009), Drishyam(2015) etc. and when these movies travel to Hindi cinema they also carry the cultural residue of the south. The carrying of cultural residue and adaptations from one medium to the other can be seen as intertextuality that allows the transformation of one channel to the other, henceforth giving new dimension and substantive component to the new medium. Hence the return of heavy action movies likes Singham or Dabang (2010) have brought back the old face of masculinity which can be held responsible for creating and arousing gender stereotypes. These heroes
have their vulnerable side as well in relation to their strong women interest. But on the other hand this new form has also brought movies of patriotic interest back to the silver screen. The relationship between masculinity and nationalism holds a very vital place in the making of masculinity in popular culture. P K Vijayan in his designed course on Masculinity talks extensively about Masculinity and Nationalism and writes:

It is the gendered political gaze of nationalism and the nationalist that has engendered for instance both anti-colonial Indian nationalism and the more recent Hindu nationalism as well as their constructions of ‘national’ masculinities and femininities. (199, Vijayan)

Theme of Police officer or common men leading a battle against a corrupt system and politicians are great hits in current scenario. The larger than life representation of typical Bollywood hero has gone through a sea change in contemporary scenario, where the issue or content based movies have replaced the aura of “The Hero”. The cliché of physical self has changed and the very representation of hyper masculinity in certain movies appears as a criticism of the self.

Masculinity represents those practices and ways of being that serve to validate the masculine subject's sense of itself as male/boy/man, within a complex dynamics of different subjectivity, power and identity, weaving their way across the social web. So a core masculinity that lies deep in men's inner biological state and consequently being a natural propensity is not an acceptable idea. Yet man and masculinity co-exist in a political and gendered landscape and this gendered order is always reflected or concealed within the discourse of common life. This sociology of masculinity tries to understand the connection between various forms of masculinity and the symbiotic relation between 'manly' behaviour and the cultural influence on this practice. Bollywood, as stated before, has seen various aspects of masculinity which were of course cultural products of society in their respective times. The face of angry young man were shown as individuals only meant for physical strength, and show-off of bravery to protect their women crying lonely in a corner of their father's estate waiting to be rescued. The protector- protected equation was very central to the idea of power and patriarchy. And then the “men” travelled to the next generation which saw men as soft and fragile. They were clean shaved, suave with intense emotions and ready to cry and become sentimental. The culture which believed ‘tears are not meant for men’ saw the rare picture of their popular icons crying on silver screen in despair or deprived of love or any other personal loss. But is the meeker urbanized masculinity an answer to gender divisions? Not exactly we guess!

The contemporary form of masculinity has travelled far and has left the ‘metrosexual men’ somewhere in between and surprisingly popular Bollywood icon like Shahrukh Khan, who was closely associated with this idea of ‘metrosexual men’, has started appearing with whiskers for intense looks in his roles. Movie Gabbar is Back carrying the remnants of its source in south portrays a violent strong man played by the actor Akshay Kumar. The form of hyper masculinity portrayed by the protagonist fighting against a corrupt system is representation of a man who is emotional and at the same time he has a desire to do something in national interest. This desire of his is of course motivated by a personal loss, and he goes on to fight the system and take the vows of common men. The appearance of Akshay Kumar in the movie is also of interest for this paper. A man with beard and proud moustache is like the face of lumbersexual men – “Lumbersexual is a portmanteau, derived from lumberjack and metrosexual, coined in 2008 describing a physically fit man who has adopted style traits typical of a traditional lumberjack, namely a beard, plaid shirt, and scruffy hair, as supplement to his otherwise clean-cut and fashionable style choices” (The Guardian). This form of masculinity which is somewhat connected to the roots can be seen as an enterprise regaining the former face of men. Denver Nicks described the trend as perhaps an attempt to "reclaim masculinity". Ranveer Singh is another popular Bollywood figure falling under the category of lumbersexual man. The actor with his appearances in movies like Ram-Leela and the recent release Bajrangi Mastani (2015), is redefining the looks of Indian youth. The Bollywood actor with his moustache look, both off and on screen, has revamped the face popular Indian men. Bajrangi Mastani, is based on a historical character and hence such portrayal is part of the timeline they had in the movie but we need to take a note on how Ranveer's portrayal is different from the actor Hrithik Roshan from the Jodha Akbar (2008), another movie with historical timeline. The clean shaved, suave and calm appearance of Hrithik Roshan stands in complete contrast to that of rugged, roaring Bajirao played by Ranveer.

The multifaceted form of masculinity is also welcoming movies like Dum Laga Ke Haisha (2016) that marks a return to the ideal classical hero, Ayushman Khurana playing the protagonist, a man of lower middle class struggling to find a place for himself in society. The film doesn't project the protagonist with physical strength or someone dutifully rescuing his female counterpart, as was the common scenario in earlier movies, a quality on which the success of the movie and hero was adjudged. Movie in its due course critiques various stereotypes related to gender and beauty particularly. The idea of beauty is seen in limited aspects of colour, body shape and figure but this movie shows that beauty of the mind is equally important, companionship and equality is something that leads to a successful relation. The year also saw the release of “Ki and Ka (2016)”, the movie is about a wife who works in office and a husband who stays at home. The role expected from the women of the house i.e. Ki is fulfilled by the male i.e. Ka and Ka’s role that is the male of the house is performed by the lady- Ki. The movie is based on a son's desire who wants to be like his mother and wants to look after the house, performs domestic chores like a mother is expected to do and he meets a girl, who is very ambitious and happy with her job and corporate life, together they project an ideal couple. The performativity associated with gender roles is reflected in the movie and we see the smaller narrative taking a grand space- the idea postmodernism projects. The movie marks a break from traditional gender roles and tries to explore the unexplored idea. Such movies show that we are accepting the plural idea of masculinity and rejecting the rigid form of masculinity associated only with dominance and strength.

Interrogating the face of Indian masculinity also involves the study of rural masculinity. The study not only adds dynamism to research but also allows us to explore the representation of
men, we have witnessed for long on screen. The idea of metrosexual men and urban masculinity is of course west-centric and so is the idea of new body and six packs. There is no doubt that the metrosexual heroes have ruled the silver screen for a long time but not more than the rural hero usually from village or from certain corners of the nation who arrives in the global city with a heavy baggage of dreams and hopes and at times he is exploited by the ‘space’ and at times the relationship goes the other way round. The rural space bound hero has re-emerged in the popular cinema through movies like Dum Lage Ke Haisha(2015), Highway, NH10 (2015) and many more and who better than Randeep Hooda can become the face of the rural heroism. The character of Mahabir Bhatti played by the actor Randeep Hooda from the movie Highway is a revolutionary portrayal in many ways. The ‘uncultured’, unconventional character with the Haryanvi accent played by the Bollywood actor stands in complete contrast to the idea of hero often associated with metrosexual men. He with his rural character and attire represents that subversive counter energy to the pretensions and dogmas of urban masculinity. Karen Gabriel, while talking about Heroes in his book, Melodrama and the Nation: Sexual Economies of Bombay Cinema 1970-2000, remarks that during 1970s and 80s violence and lack of emotional coherence were dominant traits of a hero in any movie but the popular rural hero is redefining the traits as they have that emotional coherence now which made them ‘unlike hero’ in 70s and 80s. Randeep Hooda rejects the dogmatic expression that ‘tears are not for man’ through his role in Highway, he largely exhibits his emotional side while showing his love for his mother, lost in her memory many a times in the movie. His emotional self stands in complete contrast to the rugged kidnapper he plays in the movie. At the same time this face of rural masculinity is not a face of patriarchy brutalising the ‘second sex’ on the contrary he can be seen as a liberal being who shares the joys of new found freedom from urban space being celebrated by Veera played by Alia Bhatt.

The politics of space is another aspect of redefining the popular cum global culture in Bombay Cinema. The plots of movies were largely dominated by the Cities and Metros symbolising the global space- a space which accumulated various cultures and ideologies in it. This space was also highly driven by various west- centric models and beliefs but the recent cinema has called for a change. The ‘new’ cinema is attempting to blur the politics of space by staging the periphery into the centre, to be more precise the plot now is based in the space often considered as marginal or ‘local’. Movies like NH10 and Highway are very apt example where the story travels from the so called ‘centre’ to the so called ‘periphery’. NH10 very clearly explores the ‘local’ space of NCR (Delhi) often darkened by the city lights of the national capital. To quote a dialogue from NH10, the police officer says about the new global space as – “Yeh shahar (Gurgaon) ek barhta hua bachha hai, badmashiyan toh karega hi”, these lines have darker connotations about the space of NCR (Delhi) of course but they also mark the arrival of the new glocal space to the Bollywood. The action of both the movies mentioned above starts in the national capital and slowly travel toward the space of wilderness- dark, unexplored, full of stereotypes and dogmas. This glocal is not a dark space but a space which was in darkness for many years, it’s a blend of Local regions and Global cities- the face or rather emerging face of Indian Globalization.

In recent times sports has come to the fore in rewriting the idea of masculinity. The idea of lumbersexual man can very well be associated with young sports men. Proud Moustache and beard have become the fashion statement of various sports icons like- Virat Kohli, Shikhar Dhawan, Ravindra Jadeja etc. who can be seen proudly touching their moustache on the ground reminding us of ‘The Winners’. The recent widely spread ‘beard challenge’ among sports men and popularity of sports like Pro Kabaddi league again takes us to the changing form of masculinity which is connected to our roots and also has a touch of liberalism, ready to accept the changing scenario.

To conclude, in the course of the paper, we have tried to talk about the new popular face of masculinity which is a blend of both rural and urban form in various ways. The facets of ‘popular’ is not something solely linked to cities, urban spaces or metros as it is often perceived but it has its roots deeper in alternate shifting spaces. The poststructuralist idea of intertextuality is something that can be seen parallel to the changing cinema and appearance of its hero, which is un/knowingly made of other films or texts adaptations. The previous texts play a great role in making of the new discourse. Julia Kristeva herself says, “any text is in fact an ‘intertext’-the site of an intersection of numberless other texts, and existing only through its relations to the other texts.” (Abrams, 398) In the paper we have tried to show as to how embodiment of “hero” has travelled long from the past, adding so much to the cinematographic discourse and hence become dynamic and it will continue to be so. The line between main stream and off - stream films are getting thinner day by day as more and more moviegoers are applauding men like Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Irrfan Khan, Dhanus in the lead roles. The reason maybe the rise of poststructuralist studies and the audiences are mostly highly educated urban young people. Formula films are gone now and every new film tries to break all the tradition and the same is happening with the concept of masculinity. Such endeavors were beyond imagination a few years back. The Bombay cinema has recently celebrated hundred years, we have travelled long and the voyage has witnessed many changes; at times the changes were in form of return to classics at times they were in reaction to previous phases. Intertextuality we believe, we exist in fusion and hence it would be interesting to see from this vantage point where will the change lead us into the new horizons of masculinity.

Works Cited
