

A Feminist Study of Shashank Khaitan's film *Badrinath Ki Dulhania*

Samiksha Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of English, IEC University, Baddi (H.P).
 Email: samiksha.sharma112@gmail.com

Abstract- Cinema is the popular means of communication and entertainment since its inception. Cinema portrays the life of mainstream people on the screen in a fictitious manner. Social films paved the way for social change and questioned the various inequalities on the basis of caste, gender and creed. Film makers were always inclined to interrogate the nature of women suffering and projected the women issues like dowry system, women safety and gender inequality on the screen. With the advent of feminist movement in India, the focus of film makers shifted towards the women centered plots. Various facets of women suffering, damaged psyche of women and innumerable sacrifices done by women have found a space on the screen. The female protagonists of the films were projected as intelligent and independent women who stood up against various forms of oppression and suppression at the hands of patriarchy. The present paper attempts to analyze the Shashank Khaitan's film *Badrinath Ki Dulhania* (2017) from feminist perspective. The film is a critique on gender inequality and dowry system, and questioned the affirmation – a boy is an asset and a girl is a liability. The protagonist of the film Vaidehi is projected as a 'new woman' who made her own choice in life, rebelled against the institution of patriarchy and narrated a new meaning of gender.

Keywords- Cinema, women, patriarchy, gender, society

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema is the virtual representation of the real world and acts as the store house of various cultures, rituals and ethnicities. Cinema has the efficiency to affect and mould the perception of audience which can help in nation building. Indian Cinema project the lives, aspirations and problems of a common man on the screen in a fictitious manner. Although, India is heading ahead as a developing nation but we are still accompanied with social evils like caste system, religious intolerance, poverty, women safety and gender inequality. Cinema opens up the way of bringing the tabooed issues on the screen which are usually not discussed as a matter of shame and disgrace to the traditional values. Stories reflecting on the red carpet issues have an affinity to prick the conscious of the audience and thus appeal for social change. In the last decade, film writers and directors have shifted their focus on the narratives of the women who have rebelled against traditional norms and tried to create their own space and identity. Movies like *Queen*, *English Vinglish*, *Pink*, *Highway* and *Dear Zindagi* have projected the women characters as victorious, who made their own choices and rebelled against the gender biasness. Shashank Khaitan's film *Badrinath Ki Dulhania* which was released in 2017 is a social commentary on gender inequality and institution of patriarchy and therefore qualifies as a feminist film.

Feminism talks about gender inequality and sets out to liberate and emancipate women at social, political and economical level. As a critical theory, feminism questions the supremacy of male and subordination of women in the society. Feminist critic, Pam Morris defined feminism as:

Political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. This perception provides feminism with its double agenda: to understand the social and psychic mechanism that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and then to change them. (1)

Shashank Khaitan, writer and director of the film *Badrinath Ki Dulhania* sets out as a revolutionary who targets the evil of dowry system and parents preference for a male child over a female child in Indian society. When feminism is the war cry of a generation, Shashank Khaitan came with a film which is a criticism on gender inequality and throws light on the ill effects of dowry system still prevalent in contemporary India. The film projects the female protagonist, Vaidehi as a strong headed woman who wants to fulfill her dream of becoming an air hostess. She wants to fly, conquer the world and transcend the boundaries set by patriarchy. The plot of the film

shows Vaidehi as a convincing, mature and ambition driven woman who is not willing to consider marriage as the centre of her life. Vaidehi emerges as a strong voice against the practice of dowry.

The setting of the film is apt as Shashank Khaitan selected two small cities of Jhansi and Kota which have low sex ratios and people are adamant to follow the rigid rules of patriarchy. The story of the film revolves around two characters namely Badri and Vaidehi who are poles apart and their effort to change the social structure of society is the thematic concern of the film. Badri is a handsome young man whose qualification is mere matriculation. He impresses others with his family reputation as he is a son of a wealthy Zamindar. Patriarchy is all pervasive in the film and Badri's father acts as a patriarchal figure who controls the lives of his family members. His one word is the final answer to all questions. The plot of the film highlights that not only females but males are also victims at the hands of patriarchy. The literal meaning of word patriarchy is "rule of the father". Indian society is male dominated and head of the family enjoys unquestionable power and he takes all the decisions and takes control of the lives of other members of the family. The freedom of choice is almost a non-existing entity in Indian families especially in case of a women. As Millet asserts; [Family] is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. [. . .] Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads. (Millet 33)

Badri's brother, Alok Nath wished to marry the girl of his choice but his father disagreed and he unwillingly married another girl. All through his life, this decision pricks his conscious and he finds escape in drinking alcohol. Alok Nath's wife, Urmilla is another victim of patriarchy in the film; as she is well qualified and wants to execute her knowledge and talent, but the head of the family would not allow the women of his family to work outside like males; as it is a stain on the honor of the family.

Vaidehi is the second daughter of the family. Vaidehi's father like any other middle class father wishes to marry off her two daughters. He lives under constant anxiety and tension related to the future of his daughters; as marriage is an expensive process and in-laws demand heavy dowry as a price of marriage. The film is a bitter satire on the business behind marriage which pollutes the auspicious bond of marriage. Even religious scriptures preach that dowry is forbidden and parents of bride should not be persuaded in any way, but the veil of greed has fallen upon people and they have relegated the practice of dowry as status symbol. The evil practice of dowry and expensive marriage function is the reason that

people don't want daughters at their homes. Father of a daughter feels a social pressure to pay huge some of money as dowry, otherwise, his daughter would not get a suitable husband. In the middle class families, women are denied the opportunity to pursue the higher education as family does not have enough money to spend on their education as well as on their wedding.

In the film, Badri and Vaidehi exchanged their first glance at a marriage ceremony and Badri makes up his mind to marry Vaidehi. This is not a conventional love story where the lover woos a girl and she reciprocates with feminine gestures. The protagonist of the film, Vaidehi is a girl with dreams and she refutes the proposal of marriage and escapes to Singapore in order to turn her dreams into reality. This incident jolted the family of Badri and Vaidehi, as her decision was against the social norms. Vaidehi being an independent girl could not slaughter her ambitions and thus, she rejected the traditional feminine role as expected from a woman and moved towards her journey of self-exploration. She was bold enough to wage out a war against patriarchy. The film has a strong message which advocates for women's empowerment and advises parents to encourage their daughters to follow their dreams.

The story of the film ends in a dramatic manner. Badri visits Singapore to find Vaidehi as he wants answer why she left him on the wedding day. Badri being bought under a patriarchal culture could not understand the value of freedom. He has observed his mother as a silent and obedient wife and expects the same from Vaidehi. A feminist critic, Kate Millet aptly defines the reason behind such behavior and asserts that, "the culture encourages the young male to develop aggressive impulses and the young female to develop the virtue of passivity, and "sexual behavior" is almost entirely the product of learning"(Millet 31-32). Badri's perception totally changed when he meets Vaidehi and tries to understand her situation and her affinity with her dreams. In the course of a film, a transformation occurs in character of Badri and he decides to support the liberal ideas of Vaidehi. When Badri returns to India, he witnesses a ceremony organized by his father so that his brother's wife, Urmilla can give birth to a male child. Badri being a changed man now opposes this practice and questiones the false beliefs and mindset of his father. He defies the practices of patriarchy and publically supports the decision of Vaidehi and encourages Vaidehi's father to hold his head high as his daughter is rising in her life and making the name of the family.

Shashank Kaitan highlighted the issues that plague the small towns and cities of India. Women must be given freedom to make choice in her life. It is not necessary that marriage is the goal of every girl who recently completed her studies. Women in Contemporary India need space to think about their



ambitions, desires and happiness. One's source of happiness is not necessarily the source of happiness for other. The film is an attempt to bring on surface the ill effects of dowry system on the family of the young girls. The feeling of being an object of sale whose price is fixed by the in-laws fills the woman with a sense of humiliation. Majority of people witness the evil of dowry system and illegal activities like female foeticide, but they raise no voice, meekly accept, and become part of the system. Observing and thinking won't change the scenario, action is required, an unanimous effort to eradicate these social evils and to change the world view. Cinema can act as an influential tool to affect and change the perception of masses, as people can emotionally relate to it. Cinema has the potential to revolutionize the society if thematic concern of the films has a strong social and moral message. Writers and directors should work together in this direction and contribute to the welfare of the society – to make our country a better place.

References

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