

GULAAB GANG: IS IT ABOUT THE BATTLE OF SEXES OR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT OR CLICHES?

Author**

AASITA BALI

Assistant Professor,
Dept of Media Studies
Christ University, Bangalore

ARSHI WAHAB

Student, MS in Communication,
Dept of Media Studies
Christ University, Bangalore

ABSTRACT

Hindi cinema has time and again played with the idea of women centric themes to break the hegemony of male dominant movies and to show case that women characters are equally capable of pulling the audiences to the theaters. It is not unusual that most of these films tend to commodify female actress as mere object of visual pleasure to gain audience attention. Soumik Sen's 2014 released film *Gulaab Gang* though tries to portray women in a different role, yet it is not predominantly about man or woman, mainstream or periphery but a woman versus a woman. The characterisation interestingly has woman as a protagonist as well as an antagonist leaving the dominant 'man' in the periphery. The protagonist or the good lady '*Rajjo*' is played by Madhuri Dixit whereas the antagonist '*Sumitra Devi*' is played by Juhi Chawla who constantly struggles for the power position.

The very question that, what gives these women in the film liberty and the space to take up the charge in the male dominated, patriarchal society and justifies the same, makes '*Gulaab Gang*' an interesting film to study. The way it tries to portray the ideal site for women, especially in the current scenario where women's right is becoming illusive but least practiced. This paper tries to study this film from two view points, from the filmmaker's as well as the viewer's and understand how the codes given by the maker can be deconstructed by the audience and how it is not about phallus or absence of it but more importantly about the liberty.

Synopsis of the film

The film is about Madhavpur, a prototype village of India oscillating between poverty and injustice thus, subject to no development rather a part of cycle of constant perils which had made people of this village passive who accept this grim reality with the exception of *Rajjo*.

The film prominently depicts struggle of one woman, *Rajjo* who refuses to accept any kind of gender discrimination ever since she was a child and fights for her rights be it for education or for livelihood. She fights against the injustices that are socially driven and conditioned - a position that she acquires where she exerts her rights and demands the same. The director of the film here seems to challenge the notion of the struggle between man and woman and uses the same gender (woman v/s woman) to depict the tension, conflict in this film. He puts woman in the forefront and involves her to take charge of her fate. '*Rajjo*' is depicted as a messiah and custodian of the welfare of the women at large fighting the injustice.

Films and women - According to Judith Butler,

'If gender is the social construction of sex and if there is no access to this "sex" except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender but that "sex" becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access'(Butler, 1993).

Women have been part of the motion pictures since its inception. Lumiere Brothers in France invented cinematograph and they showed women coming out from the factory as part of their earlier films. Later women's representation in films varied from being an object of desire to that of the centre of attraction to stimulate responses in the audience. The objectification and commodification has been a part of the narrative culture since the silent era itself. In the essay *The Imaginary Signifier, 'Identification, Mirror'*, Christian Metz (1982) asserts that watching film can only be feasible through scopophilia, which refers to drawing pleasure from any object of desire via looking, that is the act of voyeurism which can be said as the perfect example in silent cinema.

Other than this Marjorie Rosen(1974) and Molly Haskell (1987) examine how the women are depicted in films in relation to the larger historical background and context, how stereotypical representation of women is done and maintained to the degree of how women are presented as active or passive, and furthermore the extent of screen space and time are given to women.

Thus, films and women entail how women are represented and depicted in films or cinema, the relationship between the two and the constant construction and reconstruction of the image of this gender in motion picture and its subsequent interpretation.

Portrayal of woman in Hindi cinema

Indian cinema's roots lie in so many of the arts (theatre, music, painting, photography, literature, dance, and storytelling) as well as in other aspects of culture that were stimulated by the colonial encounter and the new media that developed during the nineteenth century (Dwyer, 2006).

Indian society is traditionally embedded and ingrained in its history, culture and tradition and all these from its very inception has been the part of visual culture in films. When 'Raja Harishchandra', the first indigenous film directed by Dada Saheb Phalke in 1913 was made, it formed the very genesis of what we know as the Indian cinema or the Indian film industry today. The story was based on Hindu mythology about a king and his sense of righteousness but did not have a single female involved as actors even for the woman's role, nevertheless later in his film 'Bhasmasur Mohini' Phalke introduced his daughter to play a character and with this, opened the industry to women characters.

In the 1930's however, women like Devika Rani, Mehtab, Zubeidaa, Shobhana Samarth entered cinema thus ushering a new change by restating and restructuring the very essence of cinema with significance of women in film. Later Meena Kumari, Madhubala, Suraiya and Waheeda Rehman took the league. Thus films now had women in the centre of the theme. films like "Alam Ara", "Achhut Kanya", "Nirmala", "Jeevan Prabhat", "Chitrlekha", "Parineeta" and "Zarina" revolved around women as protagonists. Actors of this era, irrespective of the gender, enjoyed equal remuneration; they were treated at par (Arpana, 2014).

Yet women had prescribed roles and functions which was an extension of real life on reel life. She was either expected to be a prototype of 'Seeta' chaste and virtuous wife of Rama or 'Savitri' an epitome of morality, loyalty, virtues of honor and strength who brings back the life of her dead husband from 'Yamaa' – god of death. 'Manusmriti' - an ancient Indian text defines various roles of a woman according to the stages of life. An ideal woman who in her childhood, should belong to her father, to the husband in her youth and later to her children when her husband is deceased (Finch, 2012). The principles of which are practised even today onscreen to depict that women conforming to these rule are often happy and content and if not then they are branded as non-conformist, immoral and improper.

Four dominant 'ideal' women in Hindi cinema

The four dominant roles of women in popular Hindi cinema revolves around of an ideal mother, ideal wife, vamp, courtesan (Dissanayake, 98). The ideal wife is represented as chaste and pure, she is expected to be a conformist to the traditions of the family, catering to everyone's needs and be a subordinate to her husband, as his *Ardhangini* or the better half. She is further shown within the compartments of the house, the hearth. Films like *Dahej* (1950), *Gauri* (1968), *Devi* (1970), *Biwi ho to Aisi* (1988), *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988) are examples of how women are portrayed as ideal wife who is submissive and passive.

Next is the ideal mother, who is the nurturer and the caretaker of the family. The character of Nargis in *Mother India* represents the ideal mother who is ready to sacrifice her honor for her children. In 1957, the role played by Nargis in *Mother India* as '*Radha*' symbolized a women of integrity, rectitude and righteousness. She exemplifies famine and poverty and single handedly raise her children and uphold the basic morality of being a woman, a bearer and ethically right.

Indian mothers have religious connotations and suggestions, that symbolizes inner strength associated with goddess *Shakti*. The role of Indian mother has evolved over the period of time from a self sacrificing women who is abandoned by her husband with a only child so that the husband can pursue his ambition or that of a woman who waits for her son to wreak vengeance against the injustice meted out to them and seek closure, to a modern mother who supports her son and finds ways and means to ensure that he is able to marry his love interests for example in films like *Maine Pyaar Kiya* or *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*.

Another ideal role for a women to play is that of a 'vamp'. he is most of the time the other love interest of the protagonist, she could be one of the two types, one that signify something which is western and modern, she is a non-conformist and as opposed to the ideal wife she is supposed to dishonest and fickle in relationships, further drink, smoke, dance and party, the reference here is to the western women and she is also someone who is judged and through whom lessons are learnt like Nadira in *Shree 420* or Bindu in *Kati Patang* or Priyanka Chopra in *Aitraaz*.

Finally ideal depiction of women is that of a courtesan, she is either a prostitute or bar dancer. She symbolizes sensuality and is open about sexuality and is often the one who caters to the various

needs of a man which he does not get from his marriage. Waheeda Rehman in *Pyaasa*, Rekha in *Umrao Jaan*, Madhuri Dixit in *Devdas*, Kareena Kapoor in *Chameli* are some of the examples of characters who plays the role of second fiddle. Thus, women's role and presentation in Bollywood films have evolved, taking sharp shifts in terms of their portrayal.

Shifting locus of women in Hindi cinema

Films continue to portray women within the four categories as suggested by Dissayanke. Though there are examples of films where women's role cannot be confirmed into one category and moreover moves into the grey shades. From being a prototype of 'Seeta' or 'Savitri' to being the wicked 'Manthara' or 'Surpanakha', Hindi films have become more open to roles which projects her as the fighter or the center of the power position. One of the most remarkable film is 'Seeta aur Geeta' (1972) which reflects the shift in the way women are represented. The protagonist is in dual role both in stark contrast of each other played by Hema Malini, one of that of a giver and ever sacrificing stereotypical Indian woman and the other as independent and liberal who stands up for herself and for her rights.

Mahesh Bhatt's film 'Arth' released in 1982, projected the character of Shabana Azmi as submissive yet conscious women who demands equality when it comes to infidelity. This film depicts an upper middle class, educated woman who strives to create her own distinct identity after being left by her husband for another woman. 'Astitva' (2000) starring Tabu, celebrates women's freedom in terms of sexuality and questions male chauvinism and hypocrisy from an ideal mother to a surrogate mother. Indian cinema has become more open to accept portrayal of women in more assertive and dominant role. 'Filhaal' (2002) a film by Meghna Gulzaar discusses serious issue of surrogacy but with more sensitivity and compassion. It is a story of two friends, played by Tabu and Sushmita Sen who are like shadow to each other and neither of them hesitate to break the social norms so that one of the woman can enjoy complete family and pleasure of being a mother. Thus, there has been an interesting chronology and a shift in the way characters of women have been developed and representation in cinema per se.

Even though social and political structures advocate gender equality in all spheres, women in Hindi cinema still face strong gender discrimination. Female representation in films varies from independent, working, empowered, urban women following her dreams and ambitions, to female as

the power centre, to one who is dismembered and explicitly or implicitly is established as the object of desire. The past seemed to be more glorious in terms of equality between the sexes compared to the current scenario. (Arpana, 2014)

Gulaab Gang:

The film '*Gulaab Gang*' by Soumik Sen is a grim tale that entails social inequality, injustice, oppression, poverty, distress, gender discrimination, corruption and degrading political system.

The narrative, deals with multiple facets of women's life and issues. She as the victim of domestic violence, an object of desire, morally and physically insignificant and irresolute. Soumik Sen refuses to idealized the situations of women or restrict himself to just present it superficially. He prefers to depict the naked reality of women, here the women of Madhavpur and their revolutionary attempts to assert themselves as significant and equal.

'*Gulaab gang*' which can be literally translated as 'gang of rose/es', is a film which uses pink saris as costume to signify celebration of femininity at the same time depicting that their lives are full of thorns and therefore constant struggle for survival. These characters act/react/negotiate and fight for the restoration of justice. To position women as centre and break the status quo, Sen bring into play various plots where the struggle requires violence as a tool for revolution which he borrows from Karl Marx who suggests revolution as the means of social change and transformation.

The director depicts man as the superior gender, centre of the symbolic structure and is yet not the villain either overtly or explicitly in the film. He at various juncture emerges as an obstacle or hindrance between women and her independence. A woman here plays the role of protagonist as well as takes over the role of the conventional man and becomes the centre of contention. The women of Gulaab Gang initially are only aware of their basic rights required for bare survival. They stand up for their share of basic amenities like ration, water and electricity. Thus gradually start realizing that their rights are not just restricted to just amenities but also they deserve to be treated with dignity and pride. They realize that it is unfair to physically abuse women for any kind of financial favour.

The beginning point of the film is the women's struggle for education. The denial of education and exclusion from the system show how politics is woven around to exclude women from any process

of intellectual growth or decision making. Here education is a monopoly of few and by few. This oppression is the key towards the greater revolution to restore the dignity and demolish the class structure. Members of '*Gulaab gang*' do not hesitate in fighting the injustice through violent struggle, involving in the exchange of physical blows and the use of weapons.

Marx in his doctrine has suggested that private property is the reason for socio economic inequalities, dependency and also triggers power struggle between the sexes. Man is designated as the sole guardian and possessor of power, the phallus is the centre of this power position, where there is no space for women to exercise any free will and subsequently fetter and chain them in a cycle of extreme surveillance and scrutiny. Here the concern of the director is not to bring forth man as the enemy of women but to position the same gender as the antagonist. Here feminism as a collective conscience of the woman is actually questioned and challenged both explicitly and implicitly. The film in many ways tries to challenge the conventional ways of depicting man as the evil destroyer and women as subaltern and always at the mercy of "*the man*".

It rather characterizes the good and the evil through the leading ladies of the film, Rajjo and Sumitra Devi. Rajjo is the "good" woman with basic literacy and is sensitive towards rights of women and their position in the society. She takes up their cause and encourages breaking the shackles of ridiculous practices in the name of culture and traditions. She trains them to become independent economically, socially and mentally against the villain Sumitra Devi. This stance of Rajjo also reflects the position she holds as the centre of the power independent of the phallus. Thus, Socialist Feminism becomes significantly glaring in *Gulaab Gang*.

Therefore, Sen definitely has not put the two leading ladies opposing the other but the idea that man is not the only enemy of women; a woman can be an enemy of another woman too. Therefore questioning conventional existential philosophy as well as reality, that is, man versus woman, man as the enemy of woman challenging feminism, as a school of thought. This deconstruction and shift of ideology therefore seem to counter attack the very genesis of feminism as a discipline. The idea may be here is to deconstruct and question the very ideals of feminism as a subject of study. It provides a counter and a parallel perspective to the issues of feminism where the antagonist is deliberately chosen as a woman and not a man. Thus, trying to dismiss the gender connotations and only perceive it in terms of an idea. It is the battle between the good and bad, moral and immoral and

just and unjust which is emphasized. Therefore, to eradicate the whole notion of gender here by making the characteristics or human ideals and morals more important than the source who embodies it. The attempt here is may be to question the very issue of feminism and provide another lens for observation and perspective.

To now analyze the film by dismembering the incidents, so we see how the gang sees, act and react. The only way to address their issues and end the tyranny is by a revolution that is attacking the perceived enemy of this “other”. They first attempt to negotiate with the parties in all their acts, be it in the first incident with the officer at Block Development Department for electricity or with the husband of the ostracized Kajri, even to madamji, Sumitra devi but upon it's refusal and condemnation the end resort for the gang is violence and attack. They adhere to marxist feminism in seeking redressal for all the wrongdoings in the society around them. There issues are small and concerns only around getting instant rewards and solutions but with Rajjo stepping into politics, their responsibility becomes wider, from micro to that of macro and it is when the revolution takes a wider leap. The death of Sandhya and Mahi in the process of this larger pursuit is the greater sacrifices paid for the greater cause which is yet to come. The death here is just not an insignificant event, which is at the hands of the rivals but it is the sacrifice of the women for their clan, their gender, for the greater good. Marxist feminism believes in seeking to break the status quo at the cost of anything and with the death of these two associates of the gang, the two prominent women, this point is proved.

The cultural angle to Gulab Gang

Cinema, ever since its inception has been part of our culture, more so visual culture but it only remains a part of the whole in which it enfold. The whole is the society where cinema is just a component of it. Cinema depicts society, culture and human traditions but is definitely not larger than life. And to understand films it becomes highly fundamental to be perceptive to the regions' or country's culture, traditions and mores from where that piece of art originates. Culture is synonymous with humans, people in a particular region follow a particular set, standard or way of life, a phenomenon which is universal as a concept all over the world yet is unique to it's custodians as well as the bearers. It differs greatly from region to region and each has its own distinctive features and characteristics. Moreover, culture is hegemonic, dominating lives in specific forms in

specific regions but on a wider level it is fluid and holds different meanings for different inhabitants strongly determined by geography.

So talking about Madhavpur, Rajjo's village somewhere in north India where all the happenings unfolds, we see the plot working on the foreground with the culture and tradition of this place constantly played out at the background. The gang members denounce cultural imposition which are bad for the women, gender roles, more rights and power to the men and women restricted to the hearth, practices dowry system, education is not seemed as something progressive but regressive, Rajjo's childhood incident with her step mother who resorts to a saint to cure Rajjo of the "disease" for showing affinity towards acquiring education are all cultural perils working at the background, providing fodder for the tragedies that unfolds in the film.

The gang might have denounced and saved many girls and women who have been a prey to this *culture and traditions* of Madhavpur, clearly not embracing it but like Rustom Bharucha has pointed out, we may not think about culture but think through it. "What matters is that we live it and uphold its values all costs. Culture, it could be argued is a visceral matter rather than an intellectual problem." (Bharucha)

Irrespective of the reception and perception of the gang about the culture of the village they inhabit, its distinctive traditions and customs, the culture still exist or rather co-exist.

What is interesting is to see how culture poses challenges to the gang, the perils of the long followed rules of the society which is profoundly immoral and wicked for the womenfolk. Dowry, child marriage, demanding female to be submissive to men are all the instances projected in the film that shows the culture and traditions of Madhavpur that has been followed for long. One that is hegemonic and clearly paddled by the male heads of the society. It is constructed, imposed and made functional.

The cultural heritage of any society shows how the society has been shaped. Whenever the culture discourse is considered seriously it gets reduced to tokenistic issues, thus, eluding real genuine issues which affect India today. (Thapar, 68) and this however leads to the condensation of culture.

Besides, the whole question of women's sub-altered position, as victimized and demoralized and their subsequent freedom compromised, their rights and independence which has been explored and

is the moot of this study, can be further discussed and understood through culture as a tool. The position of women in the periphery, secondary to men, this construction by the hegemony and its maintenance can be traced back to the Ramayana which depicted Sita as a bearer and not the maker. Thus, the foundation upon which the present society has been erected or laid has its roots in the ancient India. This phenomenon maintains the patriarchal dominance in India and defines gender relations and constitutes it even today in real or reel life.

The cry of feminism in Gulab Gang, the very foundation of the film upon which is based is culturally perpetuated, imposed and caused. Therefore, the film is just not about feminism but also about how feminism emerged as a response to the redundant culture. The film can be seen as layered with multiple background, politics and history which make it a challenging study of interpretations.

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