

THE BOLLYWOOD FILMS *Astitva*, *Dor*, and *English Vinglish* - A FEMINIST UNDERSTANDING

Dr. Krushna Chandra Mishra,

Associate Professor in English, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh

Abstract: Films using feminist perspectives seek to awaken people and societies to various pressing needs of contemporary relevance to help effect such indispensable behavioural changes that can put an end to misery that is otherwise inevitable if the war of the sexes continues due to the backward conventional male mindset. The question of women's dignity based on a sense of equality as eminently raised by feminist movements is very ably taken up by such films. This paper takes three Bollywood movies - *Astitva*, *Dor*, and *English Vinglish* - as examples of the feminist concerns that have been expressed in them.]

Any search for feminist concerns and goals in films has to be an extremely careful exercise. In traditional societies like ours in India an ambivalence seems to haunt the people regarding their cultural ways as they negotiate modernity. Identity concerns of women in a distinct form as captured in the films point to attitudes and thoughts that ought to be drastically reformed if a better society must emerge where equality issue in all spheres of social practices gets properly addressed. As a medium of representation and communication three Bollywood films selected here seek to educate the audience by injecting feministic consciousness through the power of entertainment. A considered use of such injection of a productive consciousness may be to end antagonism of sexes and promote an atmosphere that would in due turn work out mutual accommodation with assured co-operation of the sexes where right to exist with dignity is not decried and denied. An egalitarian order in a just society being very essential as a goal to contain the hostility of the sexes, such films seem somewhere to be clearing the mental block in the adversarial contenders among the sexes while holding the promise for reconciliation and constructive co-operation to convalesce a diseased world of relationships into health and happiness.

Films as narratives offer stories. The stories have their inspiration in the social events against which the writers cast their own ideologically charged messages. In other words, the film presentation seeks to communicate to the society something very important to let it discover how certain imminent course correction is inevitable if the larger goals before the society must be achieved enabling a conducive atmosphere where every single member contributes in the most effective way what is expected of him/her in changing situations. To prevent chaos and catastrophe to be following the same then is the function of literary communication that is sought to be discharged in films today where understanding of what needs to be done is effected thus leaving scope for an all-round social change. The films as discussed below seem to serve this very end – of justifying why in our world movements are important to ask intellectually hard questions and to engage entire social energy to combat those questions to arrive at settled and acceptable answers that in due course are to translate into corrective mass social action programmed and promoted to reconcile all forces whose collective dynamic contribution holds the key to the progress of the humanity.

It is because somewhere the dream for a life to efficiently access happiness by ensuring exercise of the ideals of freedom, equality and justice fuels the movement of feminism, the

method and the mechanisms to realize it have to be neatly selected and effectively employed so that the verbal and visual representation of reality in films would be sure to hit the mark. The semiotics at work in its entire complexity has to be understood so that the hermeneutic order in the structural effort attending upon the film as a packaged product aiming at conveying things significant in an artistic fashion could be properly worked through and the audience while meaning to stitch out factual details and social data in the bid to arrive at inferences for a summary guidance in matters of real-life issues and interpersonal behaviour could be reasonably supported. The social meaning of art in case of films being of very great utilitarian value from a futuristic perspective, feministic-orientation behind certain films seems to employ art as a vigorous ideological tool wherewith drilling a concept into the social psyche is possible to let it abide there till action envisioned by the artist is in verifiable execution and the world is on its way to embrace the stated tenets of reform.

Bollywood as the entertainment capital of India calls the tunes for the spirit of humanity in its best expression to seek for the appropriate idioms and metaphors in cinematography to let the audience receive from the realm of art those very special intimations responding to which in due course seems to unite men and women to usher in happier times when male chauvinism and patriarchal domination would wither away and feminist fire in the accusations ,genuine as they are as of today about male- centric culture, language, literature, films, would be desirably dowsed. The films could be so many in this category, but three of them have been taken up here for analysis: *Astitva*, released in 2000, written and directed by Mahesh Manjrekar starring Tabu, and made simultaneously in Hindi and Marathi, *Dor*, released in 2006 ,a Nagesh Kukunoor film that features Ayesha Takia, Gul Panag and Shreyas Talpade , and *English Vinglish*, Gauri Shinde's 2012 film starring Sridevi. Whereas *Astitva* is on extra-marital sex, and *Dor* explores the theme of mutual co-operation by two women struggling to achieve emancipation from the trappings of tradition, *English Vinglish* is on the self-discovery by a middle-class housewife who gains confidence and self-respect by boldly stepping out of the house and learning English.¹

Bollywood films – *Astitva*, *Dor* and *English Vinglish*

Feminism as a movement has made people think of how a woman's life has been and in sharp contrast to it how it should be addressing the issues of woman as a being and contesting the traditional backward male rigid requirement that a woman's world must be centred around the man to whom in service and obedience a woman has to be just a dutiful wife or a dedicated mother. Every stereotype essentially created to suit patriarchy and serve its purposes has come to be exposed in terms its hollowness and oppressive potential from the woman-centred view point. Questions of women's status, equality of the sexes, dignity, violence in the family sphere and outside it in workplaces, commodification of woman's body, right to freedom in matters of sexuality and reproduction, property rights and those involving inheritance etc. have become so much important that the war of sexes has become a powerful theme in Hindi cinema. With the entertainment industry and the silver screen having to exert strong cultural influence on the Indian society, it is fitting to discuss some Hindi films that have found for women their space and right. In this paper, an analysis of *Astitva*, *Dor*, and *English Vinglish* has been offered in the light of feminism. Whereas *Astitva* is on extra-marital sex, and *Dor* explores the theme of mutual co-operation by two women struggling to achieve emancipation from the trappings of tradition, *English Vinglish* is on the self-discovery by a middle-class housewife who gains confidence and self-respect by boldly stepping out of the house and learning English.²

The film *Astitva* written and directed by Mahesh Manjrekar was critically acclaimed and also applauded for its bold topic. The story is that of a divorce. The film raises and also justifies the question involving the divorce. Aditi, the female protagonist (played by Tabu), takes this hard decision to maintain her individual dignity, to vindicate herself, to protect her identity or *astitva*.

The woman being able to exact such a decision was still unbelievable and unacceptable in the Indian society around 2000 when the film was produced. The traditional male backward mindset received a big jolt when the bold story was presented on the screen. The common expectation that woman should keep loyal in marriage to her husband alone and not stray out even under most compelling of natural circumstances when the body cries out for union with man for satisfaction of burning sexual hunger is exposed as too irrational and arbitrary in the context of the development of the storyline of the film. Aditi seeking gratification of her sexual urge from Malhar Kamat at mutual consent is the only matter that becomes the basis of ill-treatment of Aditi in the hands of her husband Shrikant Pandit. Even her son Aniket disowns her though she is his mother. Aniket's birth out of the sexual encounter with Malhar Kamat makes Aditi unacceptable to her husband and her son. Shrikant's own loyalty to Aditi being openly a story of its gross violation on many occasions, Shrikant is not open enough to accept Aditi's confession with regard to Malhar Kamat. The very fact that the matter was kept a secret for twenty five long years before it came to be revealed when on Malhar Kamat's death his will was delivered to Aditi at Pune when a lunch party to honour the arrival of Ravi Bapat and his wife Meghna was on. The will where Kamat leaves his entire jaydad (estate), a haveli (mansion), one and half acres of land, a good quantity of gold and about eight lakh rupees, to Aditi offers the background to Shrikant Pandit for the high voltage drama that the scene witnesses then. Shrikant asks as to why Aditi's ex-music teacher Malhar has bequeathed his property to Aditi. Aditi recounts the whole sorry thing which Shrikant considers to be sin. The otherwise happy and peaceful family life stands shattered. Shrikant seeks to punish her by allowing her to live in the house without any conjugal relationship. The fact that Shrikant has also been a blatant violator of the so called matrimonial sacred bond by very often spending nights with other women while being away from Aditi managing his business in other destinations should attract equal guilt and remorse to him and should make him look upon Aditi's affair with Kamat liberally seems judicious and perfectly human in this case. The 'secret' of Aditi's affair gives a twist to the story of *Astitva* as a woman's ultimate self-assertion. The story of identity forming a powerful theme along feminist lines is also about how truth circumstantially suppressed though against failed attempts at revealing the same to Shrikant on Aditi's pregnancy returns after years when Aniket born of that affair with Kamat disowns his mother when she is cursed and abused by her husband and leaves everything in total disarray. The fact is that Aditi does not like to conceal the matter from Shrikant, but Shrikant does not have time to pay attention to what his wife offers to say on her pregnancy. Thus, truth concealed shows its power on its belated revelation to lead to ruin what has been consolidated in terms of family happiness for Aditi based on conjugal relationship and mutual regard and honour.

Shrikant's relationship reviewed in light of how Aditi describes it shows how lacking it was in emotions and sincerity as in terms expected of a married man. That makes Meghna recall how her previous husband before she married Ravi Bapat was as depraved and bad as Shrikant. As she informs Revati of how her own estranged first husband was like Shrikant in

his unacceptable attitude towards Aditi, Revati is quick to understand that Aniket is not going to be any different from Shrikant as he is not refined in his thinking and attitude and he continues to be as backward and traditional and of a closed mindset as anybody. This is why Revati breaks away from her engagement with Aniket.

It may be seen that *Astitva* has been designed clearly after the courageous feminist perspective³ addressing issues such as male chauvinism, extramarital affairs, and spousal abuse. *Astitva* saw Aditi asking Shrikant whether a woman's desires are any different from a man's desires.⁴ In a traditional society when a male having an extra-marital affair is somehow glossed as a sign of manhood, when the same thing happens to a woman it is regarded as a sign of weakness. It is condemned as adultery. The man should be the bread-winner of the family while the woman has no need to work. A man should be able to have sex whenever he wants to regardless of whether his wife is willing. The above chauvinist positions no doubt sound outrageous and unacceptable, but sadly many men all over the world believe them to be true. The movie concentrates on such a topic that can be seen among any class of people.⁵

There are in all three break-ups in place of just one in *Astitva*. Aditi breaks away from Shrikant, Meghna before moving freely out into a respectable and satisfying relationship with Ravi Bapat breaks away from her first husband, and Revati breaks up from her engagement with Aniket thus leaving the marriage question quashed.

Dor is about love, loss, friendship, hope and redemption.⁶ The storyline is inspired by Malayalam film *Perumazhakkalam* directed by Kamal, starring actresses Meera Jasmine and Kavya Madhavan.⁷ *Dor* is a poignant tale of undefeated sisterhood⁸. It is about the transformative power of friendship between women.

The storyline is as follows⁹: Meera, prior to Shankar's death, is so young and full of life that seeing her broken under the strictures of traditional Rajasthani widowhood is heart-breaking; where before she sang and danced to film songs, afterwards, wrapped in an unadorned cotton sari, she is tentative, afraid to move or speak, even to voice her grief. Zeenat prods Meera to take control of her own destiny (to a degree) and helps reintroduce colour into her life. Zeenat, in contrast, is strong and practical almost to a fault - when we first meet her, she is working on a construction project, and when Amir distracts her from her work and tries to kiss her, she produces a nail from between her lips. Meera teaches her an empathy for the emotions of others that she never had previously.

Dor shows that the actions of men can have serious effects on the lives of women. Meera and Zeenat could come together only because Shankar and Amir had a bad encounter in Saudi Arabia that dreaded night. Amir loves his wife and Shankar on his part also is one to love his wife very much. Meera and Zeenat are the ones happy in their own ways as Shankar and Amir are not men to look down upon them and try to mould them into anything else. Meera's father is cruel as he with his wealthy tenant attempts to arrange a business transaction in which Meera is the barter. The standout among the film's men is Behroopiya (Shreyas Tapalde), an actor and a trickster first cons Zeenat, then befriends her and helps her in her quest to find Meera, and finally falls in love with her. However, his love is not the demanding kind, and he never intrudes on her marriage or her love for her husband. Behroopiya's friendship is a kind of anchor for Zeenat's passion, and the aid he provides is both practical and spiritual.

Dor is very touching as a film. The following review seems to be a help¹⁰:

“Dor is a must-watch for all Indians; the core message transcends religion, community, strata and gender and it has a superb anti-climax. The film is entertaining and also has multiple messages that are delivered in the subtlest manner. And there are many highlights. The film is aesthetically shot against picturesque locations in Himachal and Rajasthan and some of the scenes shot in Jodhpur simply take your breath away. The script is engaging; the dialogues entertaining, witty and yet quite profound. You also have several sub-plots that surround the main story. And every scene seems to have been welletched out.”

English Vinglish, is about empowerment of a simple woman. Sridevi/ Shashi, the protagonist here boldsout when she exhibits the confidence and the ability to surprise the society with her resolve to take classes in English and thereby to be able to speak the desired standard of English in our society to be accepted and respected.¹¹ As “a genuine and empathetic film.... set around a very real-world issue”¹², the film deals with the theme of a wife and mother being loved yet taken for granted to be left hurt at times when others ignore what happens. English Vinglish seems to deliver the feminist message that Shashi has recovered and re-established her self-worth. The role of the personal awareness of situations where a woman’s existence is not acknowledged is central to this personal project of reclaiming her identity. Shashi’s consequent determination to acquire English speaking skills changes the nature of her reception by her own people, especially her husband and daughter. This may be further the feminist emphasis of the film¹³: Shashi attends classes and masters English speaking skills.

When Shashi’s husband and children come to Manhattan to attend the wedding, Shashi, who has been making all the arrangements for the wedding, makes laddoos for the party. Satish does not find it hard to make the statement — “My wife was born to make laddoos”, Shashi’s niece is supportive to her and her prompt remarks are highly revealing. She reminds Shashi that she is capable of much more than just laddoo-making. She boosts her sense of self image that she is in fact far more competent contrary to how in a poor light her husband holds her. At the wedding party, Shashi’s speech in English reminding the couple getting married, as well as her husband and daughter, of the value of family and the need to support one another without being “judgmental” (– a word Shashi has picked up from one of the many English films she has watched to learn the language), makes Satish and their daughter apologize to Shashi for their ill-manners. Shashi’s emergence as a more confident woman towards the end of the film proves the feminist project’s undiluted thrust on the self-transformative zeal that alone brings one the singular determination to achieve one’s true identity. It is not anyone’s gift, but it is one’s hard- earned glory and victory about which there is every genuine reason to proudly celebrate the self.

Shashi in finally reasserting herself as a mother, a wife, and a woman has been able to establish by example what it requires to win by beating every odd around one without being deterred by any criticism and belittlement by others.

It is still interesting to realize that English Vinglish as a film on women’s empowerment has also other important sides¹⁴:

“The movie was about courage and allowed the audience to empathize with how frustrating it must be for someone in a foreign country unable to communicate due to a language barrier, and often being treated poorly as a result. The most heart-breaking incident, once in New York, was when Shashi was unable to articulate her order in the line at a restaurant and then continued to be rushed by the impatience of lady taking the orders. The café worker had little understanding of what Shashi was going through. Hopefully films like this one will increase

understanding, cooperation, and patience by shining a light on the struggles of adjusting to new languages and cultures.”

By way of conclusion, it may be observed that the Indian traditional dominant male point of view in the 21st century is badly in the need to be replaced by an enlightened and mature outlook under which equality of the sexes could be ensured for emergence of a situation that would allow co-operation of the sexes and happily end the confrontational stance which contributes nothing except condemning every prospect of a better world to oblivion. Understanding of the feminist perspective as lies embedded in the three Bollywood films - - Astitva, Dor, and English Vinglish – seems quite useful at a time when the Indian society seems to be most aware that changing in tune with the global themes of equality of the sexes and gender justice is a need that could no longer be evaded without being made to reap the bitter results of an otherwise avoidable war of the sexes.

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