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Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes in 'Mardaani' – A Film from Bollywood

Abstract

In the present paper, the authors analyze gender stereotypes in the Bollywood film Mardaani. It is argued that in Mardaani, Rani Mukherjee's character is a representation of the 'rarest of the rare'; hence she cannot be considered to be a role model for the typical Indian woman. While the film claims to show women empowerment; (a casual first watch may show that) however there are some intelligence and competence parameter stereotypes that fall short. The authors examine them through Rudman and Glick's 'theory of backlash' which states that women are discriminated against, because they lack typical male virtues of logic, assertiveness etc. On the other hand, women who display male traits are not considered communal enough. But in this film, in spite of Shivani (Rani Mukherjee's character) displaying male traits, she is discriminated against. The authors also look at how an identity is constructed specifically for males and females. Male identity is constructed on prized power while the formation of the self is based on meaningless power. Our question is: Do women have to adopt an artificial image so that their identity becomes powerful enough?

It is a truism that the 'contemporary binary of gender translates any fractures of masculinity into effeminization' (Najmabadi 2006: 14), however, the reverse is true as well, any female displaying qualities otherwise attributed to males is in the danger of being called masculine. And *Mardaani*, the film is no exception.

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If we fall into the trap of calling the film or the characterization of the woman protagonist as progressive (which one is bound to, after a casual first watch) our understanding or analysis of the film then will be only half-baked. Hence, the trick lies in unravelling the loose ends or in exposing the gender stereotype operating within the framework of Hindi cinema.

“Women who are societally subordinate to men, are stereotyped as being nicer” (Eagly and Mladinic 1989) which is all too evident in the way women are represented in Hindi cinema. In this case, however, Rani Mukherjee’s character Shivani is not portrayed as being subordinate to her husband nor to the men she works with. She is also not stereotyped as nice, as compared to other characters she has portrayed earlier in Bollywood, in which she is mostly seen as the object of desire for the heroes. In fact in *Mardaani*, she comes across as most businesslike, wholly devoted to her work and almost displays a fanatic zeal and dogmatic determination (like a man) in capturing and punishing the offender. Normally heroines act as sidekicks, at best the romantic interest of the hero and in no way help drive the narrative forward. Their only function in the films is to look good and give voyeuristic pleasure to their audience. Although Mulvey’s theorization on fetishism and voyeurism by the film audience may seem dated in the new millennium, one still finds it relevant enough, and especially applicable to the representation of women in Bollywood. By giving Rani Mukherjee such attributes, the director is stereotyping her and associating her with the notion of the ‘rarest of the rare’ so that she cannot prove to be a role model to the Indian woman.

Earlier narratives have focused on other aspects of femininity which we argue are stereotypes, especially when women are fitted into neat categories and binaries of good/bad, virgin/vamp etc. In this paper, we argue that Rani Mukherjee’s characterization too is a stereotyped one – that which falls under the binary of gender – a woman can only be evaluated with man as the touchstone.

From politics to films, women are everywhere. While all this may be seen as an index of women’s success it could well prove to be problematic especially when situating woman in a specific context or space. As Tharu and Niranjana argue, some of the initiatives of the women’s movement is actually appropriated and annexed by the powers that be, to deflect the initiative. ‘Possibilities of alliances with other subaltern forces (*Dalits* for example) that are opening up in civil society are often blocked and feminists find themselves drawn into disturbing configurations within the dominant culture.’ (Tharu and Niranjana 1994: 495)

Our paper looks at these disturbing configurations in a form such as popular commercial cinema. While there were protests, which were held against universalisms of various kinds which destroyed the category of feminism, a form such as cinema, which is so influential, is hard at work portraying gender stereotypes. In our paper we analyze gender stereotype via the film *Mardaani*. We will also demonstrate how pervasive mechanisms of subjugation operates below the surface and how processes of 'othering' function in relation to women.

The very title of the film *Mardaani* is problematic. A woman who displays rationality, the ability to judge, assertiveness, quick thinking, etc. usually ascribed to males is known as 'mardangi' and its female version is mardaani. On the other hand, the word 'janaani' as used in local language is taken as derogatory. In short, there is no word other than 'mardaani' to describe the category of women who do not possess feminine characteristics ascribed to them by society. Implicit beliefs interpret perceptions of males and females from the moment they are born. Newborn sons are judged as larger, stronger, firmer and more alert than the newborn; daughters-though the objective measures reveal no differences. The same perceptions carry through the schools and work life. The films not only carry but strengthen such images.

Assertive Women and Feminine Men

It is usually the norm that whenever women become dominant or assertive they are likely to get a husband in a 'feminine' garb and this film too is no exception, even though the director would have us believe that he has in fact made a feminist film, but scratch beneath the surface a little and the whole claim comes apart. From the society's perspective men's solutions are seen as being more logical or acceptable (Taylor and Deaux 1975; Sterling and Own 1982) than identical solutions for and by women. Women who succeed academically or in other high-status careers are seen as less successful in romance and marriage. To be successful, traditionally, a woman needs external authoritative validation of the woman's excellence. To add insult to injury, is the process where inferences and perceptions make evidence more consistent with prior beliefs, including gender beliefs. These inferences automatically fill in the gaps in the actual evidence and enable the audience to make sense of incoming information. As the stereotypes operate pre-consciously we are unaware of their influence; we tend to attribute our perceptions and judgments to other socially plausible factors in the evidence. Rudman and Glick (2001: 743) in their article, 'Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes and Backlash Toward Agentic Women' state, 'Agentic women are viewed as socially deficient, compared with identically presented men'. Due to such stereotypes associated

with intelligence and competence stereotypes, attributions of success and failure at intellectual tasks depend on whether the actor is male or female.

Construction of the self is totally socialized and favours the male and this is reflected in the formation of the norm. While prized power contributes towards the building of the male self, meaningless power gets tagged in the self of the woman. In *Mardaani*, Shivani Shivaji Roy gets the prized power but she has to sacrifice a lot in order to hold onto that power. The orphan girl Pyaari she loves loses one of her fingers and her husband Bikram is humiliated in public by having his face blackened and made to wear a garland of shoes while his clinic is systematically dismantled by the goons in the villain's pay so that she stops pursuing him. She can only watch helplessly and later look guilty as Bikram continues to cry and express his anger at her.

Here too a role reversal of sorts takes place. It is usually a male who is called upon to defend the honour of a woman, due to the manly attributes, which he possesses and by which only he can avenge if any wrong is done to the woman. In this film, however in continuance with the stereotype it is the male who acts helpless and needs to be rescued by the female. Later, as the narrative unfolds, the villain cuts off a finger off Pyaari to teach Shivani a lesson. As Shivani breaks down, Bikram her husband consoles her by saying, "Do whatever it takes you to get him. Don't let him get away." Such scenes only contribute to the idea along with the firm establishment in cognition that in order to hold onto the position of prized power a woman may have to undergo a castration of sorts, we choose to call it female psychological or mental castration, for want of a better term.

The husband figures in this film in a passive role and the evidences abound in the film. For a long time into the narrative, we really don't know whether he is a house husband, as no one mentions him working; also, as we get introduced to the protagonist Shivani we see the camera slowly come to rest on the nameplate at their house which reads 'Shivani and Dr Bikram Roy'. From almost the very beginning Shivani dominates the film. She is first seen in a police jeep in the front seat, usually the prerogative of males and the language she employs is also typically masculine – *Aaj joint ACP Sir ka mood bahut kharaab tha. Sab ka spare part jaam karke rakkhe theh*, (The Joint ACP was in a foul mood today, he was especially nasty today.) ... *Yaha kya chootiya pachal raha hai?*, (What the hell is going on here?) ... *Jafar itne din police mein naukri karke kya ukhara? Ghanta?*, (You have achieved nothing in spite of working in the Police Force for a long time.) ' *Tum log police ko jitna chootiya samaj ke rakkhe ho na utni hai nehi*', (What do you take the Police for?) *Subah uthke Katyal kya karta*

hai se le ke raat ko kisko bajata hai sab khabar chahiye mujhe. (I want to know everything about Katyal's lifestyle.) Her body language is typically unfeminine as well. Apart from addressing her as 'Maam' which is a social marker for a woman, for her biological sex, the men working with her treat her as one of their own. She too displays a comfortable body language while with them.

There are far more frames depicting office space as opposed to domestic ones in this film as well. There are also no other female officers used as a counterpoint in the mise-en-scene. Shivani comes home late from work (she is depicted as a workaholic), and her colleagues have to literally ask her to leave office on numerous occasions, *Mam, aap ghar jao, Meera ne aap ko ghar jaldi aneh ke liye kaha tha na? . . .* (Madam, please go home, Meera had asked you to go home early, remember?) There are at least two shots which portray her husband and niece having fallen asleep while waiting for her to get back home. What is interesting is the way the husband is framed in a sleeping position-typical of that of wives having fallen asleep while waiting for their husbands to come home from work as depicted in films. The role reversal creates a sense that the husbands will have to be in feminine state if a woman acquires the male (*mard*) power. What a paradoxical situation for the *sati-savitri nari* – the most prized icon in the Indian society.

While the child Pyaari goes missing, Shivani acts unaffected, going about her business as usual, and even suggesting that her niece to get a haircut from a posh salon in Bandra at which her niece chides her, "How can you act so normal *Maushi*? Pyaari is missing for seven days, and we are behaving as if nothing has happened" thus stripping the woman of all the aspects usually associated with her gender – those of tenderness, affection, soft heartedness, possessing a motherly instinct etc. Here Shivani is made to lose all forms of human touch, which is so very important in both males as well as females, but the demands of her job is such that the female has to abandon the womanly touch and instead become "professional" and act like a man. For her, all this turns into a negative and there is social backlash.

Shivani appears almost mechanical to her audience with her niece's admonishment of her attitude. It is also through her costumes that the director stereotypes her. She does not wear any feminine attire at home either, even if she wears a 'saree' it is only to playact during the raid. The clothes she wears at home too appear to be an extension of her work clothes-the same blacks, browns, or greys or denims. She wears no jewellery, there is also no trace of make-up on her face. The work-life balance is not represented well here, for instance why can't Shivani be a good wife along with being a good police officer as well?

Shivani comes home late at night from work on many occasions, apologizes to the husband for coming home late while he is already there, posing like a good wife, waiting for them to have dinner together. The only exception is perhaps the birthday party to which she comes back home (her guests being her husband and niece who have fallen asleep) in which they smear cake on each other's face and the only time in the film in which she appears almost human in her emotions. This is to perhaps emphasize the dominant role that work plays in her life. In one instance, she even leaves for work after dinner since it is related to investigating Katyal in connection with the missing Pyaari. The husband silently looks at the watch, surprised at the lateness of the hour but does not say anything.

Perhaps the birthday scene has been added by the director to admonish Shivani's kind of lifestyle in which she works even on the day of her birthday just as any man would have done, instead of celebrating with her family. That very evening, not only has she successfully conducted a raid and nabbed a seasoned criminal, but she even goes back to the police station to complete the paperwork so that the criminal cannot escape scot free because of any carelessness on the part of the crime branch. While such workaholism is considered normal and actually considered commendable for men (numerous scenes depicting the heroes working very hard in the office in Bollywood films come to mind) the director seems to suggest that such behaviour does not suit women. It is her colleagues who have to tell her to go home, while they volunteer to take over. By stripping her of any feminine traits, the director ends up making her look rather mechanical and asexualized. While her colleagues snigger at the criminal (they have come to nab in the chawl) having sex with his girlfriend, she appears almost devoid of emotion and detached, for her all this seems extraneous to her duty and she even tells the criminal, *Rahman, tujhe toh mujhe shukriya bolna chahiye. Kam se kam akhri bar apne item ke saath game pura toh kar paya. Jafar toh beech mein ghusa ja rahatha.* (Rahman, you should be thanking me you know. It was because of me that you were able to enjoy with your girl.) She also expresses her displeasure by disconnecting the call when her superior scolds her for conducting the raid in a crowded chawl and for conducting the raid in her own way, with a rat.

“Past research on discrimination against women for high status jobs (e.g. management) has focused on descriptive stereotypes that characterize women as lacking the stereotypically masculine personality traits associated with these jobs” (Cejka and Eagly, 1999; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon 1989). In this case, however, she is discriminated against imperceptibly by the director for these very traits. In a job that is typically male oriented and male dominated such as the police service in India, Shivani has to adapt to and display traits that

are typically masculine in order to succeed in her profession, so that the men she works with and her superiors do not discriminate against her (in terms of assigning her cases or even promotions) or the criminals she punishes also do not evade her just because of her gender.

In fact, she goes one step further than her men when it comes to working, when she jumps out of the car window to pursue a fleeing shooter, runs after the two on bike, manages to dislodge both of them from the moving bike and beat them, while her colleague/junior bumbles as he tries to nab one of the criminals who pours chilli powder on his face and runs away. We think that the act of putting on a masculine charade takes a higher toll on the psyche of the woman without the director already adding to the burden. As Rudman and Glick state at the very beginning of their article, “Women in performance settings face a catch-22. If they enact agentic behaviour to be perceived as qualified for leadership roles...suffer a backlash effect in the form of social repercussions.”

And so Shivani in this film finds herself childless, aunt to a niece who has lost both her parents possibly in an accident, fond of an orphan and in a clearly dominating role with her husband and besides, it is also not very clear as to what kind of a marital relationship they have. The husband is hardly given any dialogues and is even made to go underground as she goes on a hunt to expose the kingpin of the sex racket to which Pyaari becomes an easy victim because of her unwanted status as an orphan.

While in the beginning, Shivani feels sorry for the young girl and tries to bring her home from the orphanage, so that they can celebrate her birthday, it is then that she unwittingly discovers that the young girl has been missing for a while and goes onto investigate the matter. Her police instincts are roused enough by now and she starts a preliminary investigation in which she discovers the sex racket operating in Mumbai. The young girl has thus become an unwitting victim to the greed of men and also women (Wakil's mistress Minu Rastogi also helps him and her son Karan runs the business successfully). For Shivani who follows the leads in the case to Delhi, it later becomes more of a challenge, just as it would have been to any man.

For Shivani then, the director seems to suggest that it is not so much about rescuing Pyaari as it is about taking up the challenge and destroying the villain – a man. In the end, it all boils down to that. This is how any male hero would have behaved too – exacting revenge etc. If one looks at the genre of revenge sagas in Hindi cinema one can see that seeking revenge and successfully avenging wrongs done to the hero's family has always been the prerogative of males and portrayed to the hilt in Hindi cinema throughout the 1970s, especially the

Amitabh Bachchan starrers *Zanjeer*, *Dewaar*, *Sholay*, etc. to name a few of these films.

Except for the film, *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988) in which Rekha avenges her so called murder at the hands of her cheating husband, and the ill treatment of her children at the hands of their step mom, one hardly sees women in such roles in films. The only other instance that comes to mind in recent times is that of Vishal Bharadwaj's *Saat Khoon Maaf* (2011) in which we have an agentic woman, Susanna, played by Priyanka Chopra, simply killing off six of her husbands because they fail to live up to her demands of being loving, understanding, kind and companionable. But such films in India depicting women displaying agentic behaviour are few and far between.

Shivani, as we have argued earlier is always attired in men's clothes to further the agenda of the director. In fact, what is meant to give one freedom, in terms of movement, as she is also a police officer of the crime branch (she is normally seen outdoors and in action) is actually used by the director to stereotype her. In the narrative, she is also seen to exercise at home with dumbbells, doing push-ups as well as chinning, usually the prerogative of men and used in films to depict heroes like Salman Khan and Sanjay Dutt onscreen. Women are hardly portrayed exercising on screen and even if they are shown exercising they are portrayed in ways that highlight their sexuality and desirability.

In fact, in *Dabangg*, Salman Khan in the role of a 'dabangg' police officer (used as a kind of counterpoint by the director perhaps) has to act hyper masculine. In order to be so hyper masculine, he single handedly takes on all the goons first in a warehouse, then in an eatery, next at the railway station, all while his inferiors only look on. From a psychological point of view, the collective unconscious of Indian females may reject the entire notion of liberation from patriarchal dominance by donning male attire. The message of freedom from the clutches of patriarchal dominance may fall flat on its face if the women are asked to ape the so called 'male' mannerisms appreciated by society in general. The question then arises do women have to adopt an artificial image for converting their identity into a powerful entity which is acceptable to the person on the street?

In the film, women are foregrounded but in rather different ways and in an almost antagonistic way, -one is considered to be 'mardaani', only if she performs the rescue and the other is conniving and greedy and rather a monstrous figure, e.g. a *dhandewali* who helps Wakil in the sex trade and in the end is savaged by the kidnapped girls and turns paralytic in a poetic justice of sorts. Meenu Rastogi is also portrayed as a bad mother and her failure is highlighted when the director

reveals the fact that although her son had attended the prestigious Hindu college, he is a drop-out who takes after his biological father in running the sex racket and who actually proves to be the villain of the piece.

It is also interesting to note the portrayal of the villain Karan, who is young (as is evinced by his looks) and who displays immature behaviour, which Shivani is quick to point out: she calls him the twelfth man of an under-19 team. What comes across, is that for a woman to tackle a protagonist he has to be boy-man and definitely immature. It is almost as if the director is trying to say that a wizened man as an antagonist would have proved to be a tougher call for Shivani. The director also kills off Wakil, a much more seasoned and capable criminal in the early half of the film.

Shivani, although agentic, is a Senior Inspector in the Crime Branch of the Mumbai police and perhaps an Encounter Specialist as well, and a woman, who is taken seriously and almost revered by her male colleagues, is able to successfully organize raids and flush out the scum of society, is agile enough to gather intelligence about the sex trade, and is able to rattle off the various sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), (not usually the prerogative of women in Hindi cinema, for the same reason one doesn't see many women lawyers being portrayed in Bollywood) she is still not seen as communal. For, nowhere in the film is it depicted that she has a successful family life as well; in fact, what comes across is that she gives more importance to her job and her family is of secondary importance to her.

Although the woman tries to reverse gender stereotyping by taking on a job which is generally the province of males, nonetheless she is not allowed to exert the power as backlash occurs many times, as is discussed in the paper. Within the narrative space, it is usually a toss-up between two kinds of women: one, who is termed as aggressive if she tries to be assertive and the other as 'evil' as she indulges in the sex trade. There is never a third category of woman that other women can identify with, in Hindi cinema.

There is an invisible glass ceiling that exists for every workingwoman in an organization. There is almost a tacit understanding between her male colleagues and seniors that she can only try reaching up to a certain point as far as promotions go. But, reach higher and she is hit by an invisible barrier that prevents her from making any progress in her career. A fear of the unknown haunts her; she feels threatened by society, family and begins to doubt herself. Her growth and empowerment is thus stalled by this invisible wall.

Cinema being one of the most powerful mediums and extremely capable of generating mental images should be very careful while portraying such sensitive

issues, as the depiction of women's issues. Such a vision only helps disseminate and circulate such images more and more; so much so, that it becomes a kind of vicious cycle that women find difficult to escape from, both literally and figuratively.

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