

## CINEMA AS REDEFINING MODE OF WOMEN PORTRAITURE THROUGH THE MOVIE *BEGUMJAAN*

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Cinema is the mode of representation of the society. If we want to know about the socio-cultural setup of any country, then Cinema plays as a magnifying glass in the depiction of the different institutions. Cinema, thus have to be responsive towards the context in which they locate women characters. Women characters should be possessed with the agencies to dismantle the contemporary power structures and to negotiate with the existing structures.

Cinema has to create a separate and independent space for Indian women to help them realise their dreams. Cinema's only end is not to entertain. It must begin a quest for social change through entertainment. Such portrayals would do justice to women and their role in the society. It is time that cinema seeks a redefinition of women as objects of male gaze. The paper centres on how and what were the latent conditions of women during the dark ages of partition days? How VidyaBalan acted as a convincing character in breaking the stereotypes by celebrating the multiple religions and castes under the roof of Begumjaan? How the director has portrayed 'extremes' as a mouthpiece and torch-bearer for the progressive society? So, while films from the earlier era showed women as extremely submissive and docile, recent releases like *Begumjaan* (2017) have resorted to heroines who are bold, uninhibited, skimpily clad, and promiscuous.

Realistic cinema like *Begumjaan* is different from popular cinema in the way that it takes inspiration for its subjects from real life situations and existing circumstances in the society. Though, it may apparently fall in the realm of popular cinema, its approach and treatment of characters is more convincing than popular cinema. It is interesting to examine some films from this brand of cinema which is becoming popular among audiences. This type of cinema combines popular appeal and critical acclaim.

### **Depiction of marginal (Prostitutes during Partition) with a difference**

*Begumjaan* transports us to the communally-charged time of the Partition, and the 'butchering' of India into two parts. The film tells the story of a brothel owner Begumjaan, who is ignorant and indifferent to the pangs of partition. The Brothel lies right in the middle of the proposed Radcliffe line and she is reluctant to transfer it to the two officials, one from the Indian National Congress (AshishVidyarthi) and another from the All-India Muslim League (RajitKapoor). They informed her that she has to vacate it but she is shown as defiant and determined that nothing can displace her and her girls from their home. She replies to them as:

Aapjisezubaan se kothaaurdimagmeinrandikhanasochrahehaina ... yehmeragharhai, merawatan ... aurissephleke koi humeinnyahan se hataye ... hum uskehaath, pair

aurjismkawohkyakehtehai, partition kardenge..( what you call as Brothel in your language and as per your mind-set, that is my house, my country and before anyone will oust us from here, we will divide his hands and body)

Mukherjee has used the National History of Partition and skilfully raised certain issues of the prostitutes who were not concerned with the effects of partition as 'freedom' for them had no meaning. Whether they would live in India or Pakistan, it hardly mattered to them, as for them the customers are never asked about their religion and religion and therefore partition would never make any difference to them.

Baap, bhai, beta, shohar ... Begum Jaankichaukhatkeuspaar hard mardmurghahotahai ... teen taangonwalamurgha.. (Brother, father, son and husband- all are cocks to the other side of the door frame of Begumjaan- cock with three legs)

Moreover, the movie also portrayed the role of kings in elating the confidence of the prostitutes. Begum has full faith in the Raja (Naseeruddin Shah), whose patronage she enjoys, but her hopes are eventually dashed when he tells her the reduced authority of royalty in the new, democratic India. Still, she is determined –

Jo bhiho, bhikmangokitarahnahi, rani kitarahmarungi...apnemahalmmein (Whatever happens, I will not die like a beggar, but a queen... in my palace.

It shows the self- respect of them in protecting the dignity of the class. For the society they may be a doormat, but the director has shown them as ' harbinger', 'voice' of the whole women with strong character, who can stand all united for social change!

Perhaps the impact of the film is diluted with too many backstories of characters. From the prostitutes themselves (rape, abandonment), to the Hindu and Muslim officials who grew up thick as thieves, but now finds themselves on opposite sides. The problem is, it only scratches the surface and one song is enough to show how many of the girls ended up at the brothel. But there is never any mention of what their lives were like before it all came to a brutal end.

VidyaBalan is outstanding as the foul-mouthed madam of the brothel, who has a soft heart beneath the tough exterior. It is she who carries the film on her shoulders, much like her last Bollywood outing, Kahaani. Pallavi Sharda as the lovestruck prostitute who yearns to escape from this life puts in a good performance, as does Gauhar Khan. It seems like different tales are entwined to manifest the consciousness of different strata of women. They may be different but under the mentorship of Begum, they turn out as 'power-packed women' and not the common prostitutes who have chosen their lives out of some 'needs'. They seem to be celebrating their profession and therefore, they turn out as 'Benevolent' prostitutes and not the pitiable ones!

### **Alternative version of female consciousness: The Leading lady from the Gender lens**

The narratives of Hindi cinema have undoubtedly been male dominated and male centric. Themes have been explored from the male audience's point of view. The heroine is always secondary to the hero. Her role is charted out in context of any male character which is central to the script. It may be the hero, the villain, the father, the boss, an elderly male figure etc. She is devoid of any independent existence and her journey throughout the film is explored in relation to the male character.

'My Body, My House, My Country and My Rules'– the dialogue of Vidyabalan has showcased the alternative version of female consciousness. Females, who are expected to lead a

life of submissiveness and meakness are not exposed as the same in the Bollywood movies now. The movie is a tale centred on VidyaBalan who not shown as a 'voiceless' being rather an epitome of a powerful woman who follows her own rules and can fight against the authority for her self-respect and stability.

Begumjaan (VidyaBalan) is a brothel owner and her girls are like children to her as she has given them a new life by turning out a saviour to them. Her inner self is much mellowed and benevolent than what she cares to show and she knows what it means to be a sex worker.

We first need to understand Begumjaan. A hookah-snorting, razor-tongued woman with authoritarian air, she is the master of her fate. From Gujarati to Bengali to Awadhi, her brothel has women of every caste, language and religion. Some are riot victims, some are simply thrown out of their houses and some have failed in love. Begum knows all their secrets and saves them from being homeless. New and younger girls are anyway sought in her business. The local king has taken them under his wings and that's a relationship Begum loves to flaunt.

inkesarperajaonkahaathhaina ... unkopyadonkimaddatkizarooratnahipadti... (Those who have the hands of kings on their heads, they do not need the help of pawns)

The locals are scared of her, so is the administration. Her crumbling mansion is her kingdom. Nobody dares talk to her in a mocking tone.

One would think that Begum Jaan is feminist, with the prostitutes being their own masters in the brothel. At first glance, it would seem that the fiercely defiant women are empowered, but the brief flashback shows that it was circumstance that brought them to the brothel and perhaps the only reason stopping them from leaving is having nowhere to go. It, however, gives the message that caste, creed and religion are man-made. There is no discrimination inside the brothel, neither by the girls themselves, nor by the customers. Perhaps, Begumjaan also subtly shows the 'what if' side of the Partition. What if freedom would never be ascertained to them 'legally'? Would their lives be taking different turns? Would they be leading normal lives as we are leading? The definition of 'freedom' gets redefined with the portrayal of these female characters. They are free to follow the whims and wishes as per their convenience and when the need came to wage war against the system; they stood at par with men. They are not normal female figures, rather 'Radical' feminist to bring change in the society.

### **Romanticizing women legends of Partition times.**

Parallel to their lives, an old woman in the kottha (played by IlaArun) narrates stories of legendary queens from Indian history and myth, who stood up to an ancient patriarchal world on their own terms, among them Rani Laxmibai, Razia Sultan, Krishna bhakt Meera and Padmavati. Three of these women are also played by Balan,Padmavatiis described in a voiceover.

Interestingly, the small girl imagines Begum as a warrior unlike the clients of her. This is the most interesting part of the movie as the viewers are given multiple perspectives of the same character of Begum. For her, begum is a protector like Rani Jhansi. It reflects the notion that the female 'ijjat' (honour) has nothing to the 'body' rather 'substance' of the human beings. The metaphors of Begumjaan are all mixed up, as exemplified by the romanticization of Padmavati's 'sacrifice'. She is an epitome of sacrifice and honour celebrating womanhood in true sense!

### Allusions to re-emphasize womanhood

Use of Allusions to real life incidents like Delhi's Nirbhaya incident and Chughtai's work 'Khol do'. From the opening scene of the Hindi film, where an unlikely saviour wards off a young woman's potential rapists, two things are evident: that Mukherji intends to make a big statement about female empowerment, and that his statement will come through self-defeating expressions and a limited understanding of his cause.

Mukherji may argue that Chauhan meant well. Fair enough. But what is one to make of *Begum Jaan's* opening dedication to Urdu literary stalwarts Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto in the context of crucial scenes that completely miss the point of Manto's *Khol Do*? The short story *Khol Do* was about a girl so traumatised by repeated rape during Partition riots that as a reflex action she undresses herself on hearing a male voice. That story was not just about the survivor's mental state but about her continuing worth as a human being. Mukherji is so literal in his interpretation of Manto's text that I wanted to cry.

In scenes where a very old lady and a very young girl replicate *Khol Do's* heroine's actions, Mukherji also unwittingly betrays an oddly benevolent, muddled view of male rapists resulting from thoroughly misplaced ideas of sexual violence.

The females are usually shown as bold and empowered women who lead life on their own terms, take their own decisions. They are rebels who don't conform to social norms and excel in their respective professions. But the movie has made a mark to answer few questions about what is freedom? What is celebrating womanhood? It voices the varied concerns of women that prostitution should not be taken as a profession by 'chance' rather a profession to 'cheer' by following the rules made by them and every man has to abide by the rules of them so as to satisfy their desires!

The paper is concluded with a short poem depicting the theme of the movie but showcasing the voice of every prostitute:

Freedom to me is to 'free you' from your animal instincts,  
Freedom to me is to 'let go' all your senses and emotions,  
Freedom to me is 'to celebrate' uniqueness of mine;  
Freedom to me is 'to war' against shadow of 'borders' and the Radcliffe line,  
The line which divided countries, and yet failed to divide us...  
Freedom to me is 'to mock' at you when you are nothing but cock with three legs;  
I turn out as a 'saviour' to free you from your illusions of 'freedom'...  
Yes, I exist as everybody's dream...  
Dream to get 'absolute' freedom!

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