

“Narrating Women as Catalysts in the Popular Adaptations of Indian Fiction in English”

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Abstract

Women characters in Indian writing in English and their popular adaptations into films have been so significant for their turn of the tables effect in the narratives of social realistic drama. A few prominent works like “Heat and Dust, Bandit Queen, The Name Sake, Slum Dog Millionaire and A Suitable Boy” have been looked keenly as how women characters influenced and molded the motif and momentum in the process, of telling those stories. Ruth Jhabvala had shown Indian's misplaced faith, a need for change in a chauvinistic and all exploitative mindset voiced out through Anne in ‘Heat and Dust’ who says, “I think I may rightly say I have been everything that you can see on this earth” (HD 23) representing an all invasive life of a woman in Indian society.

Life was made impossible for women that an imminent armed revolution for honor primarily and angst on redundant bourgeoisie then was portrayed by Mala Sen written and Shekhar Kapoor adapted “Bandit Queen”. Ashima becomes a catalyst in the lives of men in her family in “The Namesake” so is Latika who is a sole reason for the entire story to transcend all obstacles in Vikas Swaroop’s “Slum Dog Millionaire”, that won Oscar award for Danny Boyle for its thoughtful adaptation. This paper is a presentation of such women characters and their impactful journey in their narratives both in novels and films.

Keywords: Narratives, Adaptations, Women, Catalysts

Introduction

Women in Cinema had been treated as catalysts by fewer auteurs and especially when those characters were from their popular fiction, adapted to screen were molded with extra concern and in every detail that ensured them as key players in the process and for the progress of story and narration. Women theoretically hold social responsibility, revolt against the damaging age old practices in the society, change the way men think about family, identity and belonging etc., become pivotal narrative objects or as an aim for men to pursue as life goals and finally reverse the expectations of men and turn them in women’s favor for broader social good to denote that girls always need a ‘suitable boy’ for a healthy and sustainable society, in the end that suitability is modeled on all virtuous nature of men to become a good part of women’s lives.

Indian film history majorly shows the progression from mythological themes of pre-independent India for cultural unification and then to social circumstances of caste, religion. Portrayal of women has been keen to show the effects on society and depict the problems endured by the working class and ‘underclass’ including homelessness (*Slum Dog Millionaire*), Issues of identity crises (*The Namesake*) and the inequalities of social class (*Heat and Dust*) Women in family politics and how everything revolves around them as an ends to pursue in men’s lives (*A Suitable Boy*) and how social exploitation of women lead to armed revolution to avenge the loss of dignity of life (*Bandit Queen*) are all a few proud and powerful portrayals of Indian Cinema. Thus India’s 100-year film history spans colonialism, independence, partition and globalisation; a realist Indian cinema emerged parallel to the mainstream as early as the 1930s. With the advance of sound, all-singing-all-dancing melodramas and religious epics grew popular with Indian audiences, but a number of “social-problem” “women’s issues” in films, naturalistic in their depiction, also found fans, and this, despite being on a less-than-equal footing. The modern thought is to try and have a blend of social content and entertainment, at least to strike a balance through a gripping narration to an effective engagement of the audience from text and then in films.

Cooling the Heat and Settling the Dust

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust* film adaptation with same title popularized women characters like Anne and Olivia in its social realistic portrayal of women in post independent Indian social scenario. In that light it also tries to aim at analyzing the imagery in both textual (novel) and visual (film) portrayal with literary values and how they have led to contradictory and even incompatible, but nonetheless extremely relevant interpretations of the novel in its cinematic adaptation. It was directed by James

Ivory and produced by Ismail Merchant. It stars Greta Scacchi, Shashi Kapoor and Julie Christie. The plot of *Heat and Dust* follows two intertwined stories. The first is set in the 1920s and deals with an illicit affair between Olivia, the beautiful young wife of a British colonial official, and an Indian Nawab. The second, set in 1982, deals with Anne, Olivia's great-niece, who travels to India hoping to find out about her great-aunt's life, and while there, also has an affair with a married Indian man.

Heat and Dust is narrated in the novel by the granddaughter (whose name is not mentioned) of Douglas and Jessie. The narrator has come to India to know about the life of Olivia, the first wife of her grandfather Douglas. When the narrator comes to India, she observes the scenes of unhygienic conditions. She builds an image of contemporary Indian reality. On the first day of her arrival in Bombay, she stays in women dormitory in S.M. Hostel where she gets a glimpse of stark poverty in Indian streets. She finds another European woman who has been staying in India for 30 years. The European woman, in the beginning advises her to be extra careful for food. That is she should exercise priority to satisfy her hunger. She has seen several famines, a small epidemic, a Hindu Muslim riot and some terrible sights. When she looks into the street, there is no place for people to sleep. "She observes many children who spend most of their time begging and involved in stealing. Some of them are very young, mere children there may be hope for them, God willing they will go home again before it is too late. But others there are, women and men, they have been here for years and every year they get worse" (HD 7) India grew malicious in post-independence due to the exploitative mindset even of the educated men. Anne questions that and moves on with her independent life.

Womanhood is put-across radically

Bandit Queen (1995), Phoolan Devi in real life is a cinematic romance one of the concepts of socially realistic extreme circumstances in India. The issue of 'rape' was portrayed sensationally for the first time with its multiple dimensions but from the point of view of a woman. Phoolan was a victim of child marriage, caste discriminations male chauvinism and everything ill and oppressed in India. At the crossroads of gender and caste oppression women in India have been creating their own defense mechanisms for centuries, *Bandit Queen* portrayed a radical stand taken by a low caste woman and how she reverts the humiliation by the upper caste men. Mala Sen had written the story based on the meagerly published news item in print media as how a woman in Chambal Valley revolted aggressively and revenged her loss of dignity and damage to her womanhood. Then Shekhar Kapoor as a modern day thinking-auteur took up to telling this story visually and as boldly as he could. *Bandit Queen* was so sensational and an enigma even today in the all constrained Indian cinema, as an awareness of the impossible extremism by an oppressed woman from a lower caste.

Bandit Queen, showcases the rotten culture of the society. The society, in which, a woman is ill-treated in her own house. Mala Sen, Devi's biographer, pens in the introductory chapter of her book "India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi": "Her personal story, extraordinary as it is, reflects many aspects of life as experienced by thousands of women in rural India who continue to strive against a feudal order that persists in a 'modern' society, a society in which peasantry collides with capitalist markets and technology," Of the movie, Sen told reporters during the London Film Festival "The violence and brutality depicted in the film is happening in India everyday. . . . It's about time that we opened our eyes and looked at this reality." The pathetic position of women at that time is echoed in the movie with lots of emotion and drama which forced the audience to visualize the condition of women in that era, and to rethink on the sophisticated ill-treatment of women in the so called modern society. The movie is an eye-opener for all who says God has created man and woman equal. There was and always double standards for women. She has to struggle to show her presence. The protagonist, Phoolan Devi, was born in Gorha Ka Purwa, in Uttar Pradesh, a remote, inhospitable village not far from Behmai, was abandoned by her husband, who was twelve years older than her and the society pinpointed her for her blunt attitude and outcasted her. She was taunted and insulted by the villagers as well as by her own parents for her outspoken attitude, also, a girl left by her husband is a serious taboo. Men can go for pompous re-marriage but an abandoned girl is seen with a different eye in our society and becomes a talk of the town. Phoolan in her autobiography mentioned that her husband was a man of very bad character. After becoming a bandit, she dragged him out of his house and stabbed him in front of the villagers. The gang left him lying almost dead by the road, with a note warning older men not to marry young girls. The man survived, but carried a scar running down his abdomen for the rest of his life. Due to this incident, and because he legally remained Phoolan's husband, the man was never able to marry again.

Phoolan assertiveness can be seen from countless incidents of her life since her birth. She has to fight with the family and with the society at every step of her life. Her family was suppressed because of the mental as well as the physical segregation of upper caste and lower caste. After that she was married off to a man who was three times older than her. She was used as a commodity in her in-laws house. There were endless incidents of her life where she had come out as a real fighter. One such incident was that when she staying with her parents after marriage, her cousin, Mayadin usurped her father's parched land with the help of the landowning Thakurs. She with the help of an NGO activist tried to get back the land but did not succeed because her father himself was not supportive and was not able to fight for his right. Mayadin engineered the rape of Phoolan by gangsters because she tried to safeguard her father's land. This particular incident shows that the mentality of men is so sick that they cannot tolerate a woman to speak for her right in public. There are lots of controversies related to the film, *The Bandit Queen*. Many critics say that cinematic adaptation tinted the struggles of Phoolan. The Director has oversimplified and even cooked up incidents in order to create a filmi version of Phoolan Devi's life. But the grave reality about women's position is still the same as it was earlier.

Ashima as a Catalyst in the Identity Narratives

The film *“The Namesake”* was a novel by Jhumpa Lahiri and was adapted to screen by Mira Nair with the same name. The screenplay adaptation of the novel in which Mira Nair not only skillfully deals with the cross-cultural theme and identity crisis but gives Ashima a key woman character the much needed space. It is the movie where we actually see the relationship between Ashok and Ashima blooming with love and trust - the blossoming of relationship between two people who were estranged till few minutes back. It is as if the affectionate angle between Ashok and Ashima as a couple gets overpowered by Ashok & Ashima as parents in the novel. And of course, then there is the cross-cultural identity crisis through which Ashima struggles through on her arrival upon this estranged land. With the movie it is as if the unsaid and unspoken love of Ashok and Ashima gets words to be displayed. A kind of recognition is portrayed, though in quite a subtle way, through the visual representation of this love. One of the most just examples would be the family visit to Calcutta when Ashok & Ashima takes stroll in the romantic evenings in Victoria’s gardens. It is quite an apt situation to exemplify the matured yet naïve love between these two individuals who were arranged to spend life together by their parents.

The paper from here onwards will analyze the namesake of Ashima drawing parallels from both the screenplay adaptation as well as the novel. The character of Ashima, which literally means limitless, or the one without any seema or borders, in my views, is probably the strongest character of the story. It is not only because she is one of the lead characters but also because she is probably the only character in the entire story who stands and remains as the epitome of courage, strength, serenity, and adaptable - all at the same time. Post marriage Ashima builds a nest of her own though relying majorly on Ashok. But slowly and gradually she seems to open up to everything that her surroundings have to offer. But the alienation returns back with the birth of her children. Even though Gogol in childhood is portrayed as a normal Bengali kid who has the mother’s undivided attention for all his whims and fancies which he surely adores slowly and gradually that affection fades away leaving Ashima behind with her isolation.

At the end of the novel we actually see the real Ashima emerging above successfully of the all the difficult situations of life. She managed to survive in this strange land without even after Ashok - a stark contrast to her “uni toh thakben” dialogue many years back when she was vulnerable and willingly dependent on her husband. Be it his absence for a better job opportunity or his death Ashima has survived through it all. She has successfully gained the friendship of both of her children with whom she shared a strange yet motherly affection throughout their growing up stage. The sense of alienation that filled the air while Gogol and Sonia were growing up is now replaced with genuine compassion not only for a motherly figure but a true friend.

Latika: the Objective or Objectified in Narration?

Vikas Swaroop’s novel *“Q & A”* was adapted to screen by Danny Boyle titled *“Slum Dog Millionaire”* an Oscar award-winning, rags-to-riches story about a boy named Jamal who, despite his upbringing in the Bombay slums, himself a winner on the Indian version of the television show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* The story includes the development of a romantic relationship, which is subsequently met with a conflict that is ultimately overcome, when the couple comes together again at the end (50). This narrative arc is present in *Slumdog Millionaire*: Jamal pursues Latika, his childhood friend and persistent love interest, throughout the entire film. In the end, he wins both her love, as well as great fortune.

Latika plays roles that are secondary to men: she is Jamal’s love interest, Maman’s prized virgin, and Javed Khan’s subservient girlfriend. Despite the fact that Latika shows courage as a child when she first meets Jamal and Salim, her entry into adolescence almost instantly imprisons her in these submissive roles. She is not only subservient to Maman and Javed, who are clearly villains, but even to Jamal, who must rescue her from them both. The boys just drop her [Latika] in the middle... She is the bravest character and then suddenly she is a nothing, a pathetic woman who needs to be saved by someone who looks much younger and weaker than her” (16-17). Indeed, as soon as Latika enters puberty, she is no longer Jamal and Salim’s brave third musketeer. When the two boys decide to find her (at Jamal’s request), she is still working for Maman, the man who kidnaps and occasionally handicaps children and forces them into a life of begging in order to make a profit for himself. When Salim and Jamal find her, Latika is a dancer at a large brothel on Pila Street. The scene that shows Jamal and Salim wandering on Pila Street and entering the brothel is an acknowledgement that sex work exists in India, but nothing more. Despite the fact that 800,000 women and children are estimated to be victims of human trafficking, 80% of whom are forced into sex work, as well as the fact that “India has been identified as one of the Asian countries with a severe CSE (commercial sexual exploitation) trafficking problem,” *Slumdog Millionaire* concedes to the presence of prostitution in India, but does not engage with the issue in a meaningful way (Joffres).

Latika is not (yet) a prostitute, because her virginity makes her too valuable. As Maman says angrily to Jamal and Salim when they come to rescue her: ““You really thought you could just walk in and take my prize away? Latika, come. Have you any idea how much this little virgin is worth?”” (*Slumdog Millionaire*). That Latika’s worth derives from her virginity is a very traditional understanding of a female, rather than male, concern. The value of a woman’s virginity is one that is held even today among many societies, both Eastern and Western. In the United States, for example, many religious organizations espouse female virginity—a practice that dates from medieval times and the writings of religious philosophers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Even though prostituting from a virgin dancer is something most contemporary societies would frown upon, the “worth” of

a virgin girl is not an unfamiliar concept. *Slumdog Millionaire*'s rhetorical choice to juxtapose a beautiful young girl's prized virginity in contrast with the nameless, even faceless, sex workers all around her, promotes the importance of virginity at the expense of concealing the deeper issues women and even children face. The film does this both explicitly, through the cinematography of the brothel scene, as well as implicitly, through a conservative ideology about prostitution. First, the scene shows Jamal and Salim emerging through mist as they enter Pila Street. The street is crowded, and prostitutes stand on a balcony with their faces in shadow. Inside the brothel, the boys wander through its narrow hallways, where couples behind limsy curtains find little to no privacy. These images are cut with those of a dancing Ethos: A Digital Review of Arts, Humanities, and Public Ethics Vol. 3.1 23 Latika wearing a blue lehenga (long skirt), a color that often represents both virginity in Western traditions like Christianity, as well as Vishnu, one of the principle deities of Hinduism. In the background, the sounds of babies crying and a loud overture of Indian music mix with the more pleasant sound of bells from Latika's skirt. The accumulation of these images and sounds creates a juxtaposition between Latika's virgin worth and beauty with the unsavoriness that surrounds her. The film makes it clear that Latika's value derives from her virginity, because Maman keeps her separate from and treats her better than his other sex workers.

The film's attention to Latika's virginity seems to be an attempt to make her an even more sympathetic character to the audience. If she is a virgin, she is innocent, and if she is innocent, then she deserves to be rescued from her situation. The attention to her virginity forces Latika into playing a gender role, rather than a starring role, in *SDM*. Moreover, the brothel scene espouses a conservative critique of sex work. It refrains from commenting on the fact that while some women are enslaved in sex work, others choose it willfully as a way to make a living when there are few other options. As Hesford writes, "contradictions that characterize women's experiences within the global sex trade...compel us to read the geopolitics of recognition rhetorically...to account for the colonial and imperial stories of global sex work and the technologies that continue to position sexual subalterns as objects of sight and surveillance" (150). In mostly ignoring the issue of sex work altogether, *Slumdog Millionaire* does not allow us to enter this conversation at all or to see the ways colonialism's traces are responsible for enslaving women in the sex industry. And while Latika "belongs" to Maman, there is no indication whether or not the other prostitutes do, or whether they have chosen this life for themselves. By positioning Latika's virginity as a most valuable "prize" in comparison to the unpleasantness of prostitution, the film itself then becomes the visual medium through which these "sexual subalterns" are "objects of sight and surveillance." Later in the film, we once again see a grown-up Latika portrayed as a submissive female. Jamal tells Latika he will wait for her at the train station every day at 5:15 until she is ready to be with him, but she refuses, saying "'It's too late'" (*Slumdog Millionaire*). However, after garnering the courage to escape from Javed's house, Latika does decide to meet him. At the station, the camera shows Jamal waiting on a balcony above the train platform while Latika wanders beside the train, looking for him. Jamal calls her name, and when they finally see each other, the camera pans between their faces, shooting upwards toward his, and downwards toward hers. In this way, the camera serves to metaphorically represent the gendered qualities of this rescue scene. Significantly, this very scene recurs throughout the film in Jamal's flashbacks, creating a constant reminder of Latika's subservience, powerlessness. Ultimately, the arrival of Salim and a few other young men who work for Javed thwarts Jamal's plan to rescue Latika at the train station. They drag her away from the train and into a car before Jamal has the chance to catch them. Thus, each aspect of this scene, both at the level of plot and camera angle, functions to reinforce Latika's helplessness as she moves between captivity and rescue at the hands of men. In both the train station and brothel scenes, Latika's captivity and rescue serve as plot devices by which male characters, including Jamal, assert and develop their masculinity. Latika thus is portrayed as an object in the hands of men yet to be the objective for Jamal a boy to persuade, something as his life's aim to achieve.

The Saga for a Suitable Boy

A Suitable Boy a novel by Vikram Seth and adapted into a web series by Mira Nair and her team of auteurs. The novel opens with a wedding ceremony in Brahmpur. Mrs. Mehra's search for 'a suitable boy' for Lata is the main plot of this novel. Quest for a suitable boy for her daughter remains a great task for her to fulfill the social norms such as religion, caste and social status prevailing in the period of early post – independent era.

Gender imbalance is the hot topic of not only modern age but of all ages. Tradition, Transition and modernity are the different stages woman is passing through in all periods of history. Male dominance is asserted through traditional practices. In "Image of women in the Indo-Anglican Novel," Meera Shirwadkar claims "Traditionally, marriage for woman has entailed as most submissive feminine role, she submits to her husband and his family as a slave" (26). Male dominance is asserted through social institutions like the law, education and religion through traditional practices. Patriarchy is the social order, which is constituted by the self-sustaining structures like power, by means of which women's interests are always subordinated. Gender inequality is protested by feminist writers. They want to reconstruct the patriarchal structures of power in economic, educational and professional fields. A new era of equality between sexes would lead a social revolution since women are one half of the human population. In the patriarchal society, woman functions as other which allows men to construct a positive self-identity as masculine. De Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* declares Woman as represented by men has double and deceptive image ... she

incarnates all moral virtues from good to evil, and their opposites . . . He projects upon her what he desires and what he feels, what he loves and what he hates (229).

They raise issues that go beyond the mere understanding and deciphering of India today. The first question which comes to mind when reading Vikram Seth or seeing the web series realistic renderings of social themes in Indian rich households and their occupants are whom these representations target. One may wonder who, if anyone needs visual portrayal to view and understand post independent India and why. Bearing in mind that the memory and legacy of the British Empire still awaken mixed feelings in the Indian population, it is doubtful whether the Indians themselves unmitigatedly appreciate such references, which can be associated with the idea of British domination. In this light, the realistic interpretations from textual to visual were apt adaptations and popular, gained international appreciation.

Conclusion:

Women in the emerging India are portrayed both in novels and films as powerful yet meek but still are catalysts for the social progress, restoration of family and culture. This paper thus concludes to remarks that a wide array of woman characters is a fine reading and analysis to have an insight into women in post-independent India.

The relationship in general, between cinema and the literary source can be understood in terms of inter-textuality, inter-mediality and interpretation, and within the paradigm of translation. The novelist reinvents her own stories as the screenwriter to suit to the needs of the new medium that is visual adaptation. Besides their adaptations of the basic and typical social realistic voyage, Auteurs have confined to the problems and picturized women at the receiving end but not suggestive of their betterment in Indian society.

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