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Empowerment and Identity Negotiation in English Vinglish
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Abstract:

This research paper investigates the issues of empowerment and identity negotiation in English Vinglish, a Bollywood film released in 2012 from a feminist perspective. The film is directed by Gauri Shinde. The film is about the expedition of an Indian Woman Shashi, a middle class lady who combats with her own self worth because of her inefficiency in English language proficiency. The paper studies Shashi's makeover in which it emphasizes on how language, gender roles, and socital anticipations frame or fabricate women's identities. The paper examines how the protagonist's expedition threatens patriarchal rules and regulations and asserts her agency individually as well as publically. It concentrates on answering these research questions: how does the protagonist, Shashi, negotiate her identity through language acquisition in English Vinglish, in what ways does the film portray empowerment in the context of gender and cultural identity, how do societal expectations and familial relationships influence Shashi's self-perception and transformation, and what role does linguistic competence play in challenging traditional power dynamics in the film? This study employs a qualitative research approach, using film analysis as the primary data and the interview and secondary data has been taken through reports, research paper and film reviews. The paper advocates that the film English Vinglish provides a nuanced picturiazation of women empowerment, exhibiting the juncture of language, self-esteem, and gendered oppression. The findings and discussion of English Vinglish revolve around its exploration of societal norms, family dynamics, self-worth, and the transformative power of personal growth.

Keywords: empowerment, feminism, gender roles, identity, patriarchy.

Introduction

In Bollywood (Hindi Movie Industry), it is hard to find female-centric movies. Women in Bollywood movies are often shown as submissive to male demands, as wives, or

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homemakers with negligible roles, and producers find it difficult to invest in a movie centered around an actress. However, there are some films focused on women that have made significant strides. Among them, English Vinglish stands out. It is led by Sridevi, a heartthrob of the 90s who was often portrayed as glamorous. However, in this movie, she demonstrates the zeal and courage to carry the entire screenplay on her shoulders. She plays the role of Shashi, a devoted wife, committed mother, entrepreneur (a ladoo maker), and enthusiastic learner who travels to the U.S. to attend a wedding despite her weak English skills.

Director Gauri Shinde portrays Shashi as a typical Indian (South Asian) homemaker, starting her day in a rush, serving tea, breakfast, and biscuits, and barely finding time to sip her own coffee in peace. As per Hindustan Times' movie commentary, her teenage daughter and husband, though affectionate, treat her with subtle condescension, equating her lack of fluency in English with a lack of intelligence. She often asks her husband with quiet heartbreak, "Important baatein sirf English mein hi hoti hain?" (Does every important issue only happen in English?). The movie takes a turning point when she travels to New York to attend her niece's wedding, where she joins an English class and begins to rediscover herself. Like many typical homemakers around the world, she serves others without compromise and without acknowledgment.

In the second half of the movie, the classroom dynamic takes center stage as Shashi immerses herself in the roller coaster of New York life. It is astonishing to see Sridevi return after 15 years and deliver such a remarkable performance (Rathore, 2024).

As with many Bollywood movies, the gay character is portrayed as a stereotype. And this movie is also not an exception. The movie's greatest strength is its pacing—it doesn't rush but slowly and steadily portrays Shashi's evolution. Shashi faces humiliation for not knowing English, and the gradual progression of her character avoids relying on dramatic twists (English Vinglish - Review, 2012). In conclusion, this movie is about granting women the space to seek independence and understand the value of life.

Theoretical Review

While analyzing this movie, the first feminist theory that comes to mind is radical feminism, which highlights how Sashi, as a homemaker, is devalued by her family and the patriarchal system that trivializes unpaid domestic labor. Her journey can be interpreted as a critique of the patriarchal family structure that limits her role to domestic work.Secondly, cultural feminism is also evident in this movie. Sashi's skill in making laddoos (a traditional feminine skill) serves as a symbol of the unrecognized value of women's contributions. One could argue that women's skills should be monetized rather than confined within parallel societal structures that restrict them to specific roles.Thirdly, the movie can be analyzed from the perspective of economic invisibility(Marxist Theory), which is often experienced by women like Sashi. Her success in selling laddoos reflects her transformation from economic dependence to financial autonomy, challenging patriarchal structures.

Addition to above, several other feminist perspectives can be applied to English

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Vinglish, each emphasizing a different aspect of Sashi's journey toward self-determination. Queer feminism critiques rigid gender roles by examining how Sashi's transformation subverts conventional norms that define a woman's worth based on her familial and societal duties. Her journey is a struggle to reconstruct her identity and overcome the limitations of traditional femininity. Existential feminism is about women's struggle for self-hood in a world that tries to force preconceived roles upon them. Sashi embodies true existence as her decision to learn English and establish herself as worthy is an indication of her refusal to be bound by societal expectations and her assertion of personal sovereignty. Postmodern feminism resists one-dimensional descriptions of women's empowerment by gesturing towards the fragmented, subjective nature of identity. The film resists stereotypes by showing how mundane forms of resistance—like attending an English class—exercise profound effects.

From the perspective of global feminism, Sashi's worth is determined by her ability to integrate into a Western-centric society, while the dominance of English as a global language reflects cultural imperialism. The film critiques the international pressures placed on women to conform to modern linguistic and cultural norms. Psychoanalytic feminism explores how patriarchal conditioning shapes self-worth, emphasizing Sashi's internalized inferiority and her eventual reclamation of confidence. Her family's refusal to accept her capabilities is a result of broader cultural values that put masculine-coded skills, such as English fluency, above the rest. Subaltern studies also locate Sashi as a subaltern subject—not merely in gender, but class and language—as well—resisting local patriarchal order and global linguistic imperialism.

From a liberal feminist standpoint, the film underscores Sashi's journey of self-discovery and empowerment, advocating for equal rights and personal growth. Her success in mastering English serves as an act of self-assertion, challenging patriarchal expectations that reduce women to homemakers despite their significant contributions.Postcolonial feminism critiques the cultural hegemony of the English language as a colonial legacy that exacerbates Sashi's feelings of inadequacy. Her battle is an expression of internalized colonial ideologies that mix social worth with English language ability in postcolonial countries like India.

Finally, intersectionality is a valuable framework in that it analyzes how gender, class, and cultural identity intersect to shape Shashi's life. As a middle-class Indian woman, she has particular challenges, balancing societal pressures to adapt to an English-speaking norm while simultaneously negotiating the roles of wife and mother. English Vinglish, using these feminist frameworks, is a compelling critique of gender, class, and cultural hierarchies.

Literature Review

Film studies have been greatly influenced by feminism, which functions both a social movement and a framework for analyzing cultural discourse. Gender equality, audience representation, and the cultural influence of film are all examined by feminist film studies. Feminist films emphasize gender as a crucial component in examining women's experiences

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within the discourse analysis technique (Patricia White, 1998). Humanist feminism imagines a fair society in which gender does not determine social standing, whereas political feminist theory aims to promote social change (Hill Collins, 1990; Grant, 1993).

According to Shapiro (2017), the idea that men embody societal standards while women are frequently excluded or rendered invisible is reinforced by mass media, especially film, which contributes to the continuation of gender inequality. In movies, female characters are usually presented as weak, reliant, and overly sentimental, all of which are typical gender stereotypes. They are also frequently sexualized, objectified, and isolated as objects of the masculine gaze. The way society views gender roles is influenced by these depictions. As a result, this study contributes to a larger knowledge of gender ideology in cinema by using discourse analysis to investigate gender depictions in movies(Sholehah, et al., 2023).

Women in movies frequently have to balance competing expectations since they are expected to be independent and strong while still being feminine (Ferris & Young, 2006). In addition to including the second wave's criticisms of beauty standards and power structures, third-wave feminism and post-feminist also depart from its goals by identifying opportunities within those same institutions (Coleman, 2009). As Anita Harris (2001) points out, conflicts between third-wave and post-feminist viewpoints have fueled conflicting accounts of feminism that set "victim feminists" against "power feminists." According to research, post-feminist third-wave feminism prioritizes individual empowerment over communal social change, placing more emphasis on bodily control. Elizabeth Wurtzel illustrates this shift, arguing that expressing one's sexual power for public consumption is now seen as a sign of intelligence rather than superficiality (Wurtzel, cited in Coleman, 2009).

Women in film are positioned at this ideological crossroads. One perspective asserts that embracing and controlling one's sexuality grants women power, while another—more aligned with second-wave feminism—argues that true equality can only be achieved when women are fairly represented in terms of age, leadership roles, and aspirations beyond the family sphere. The conventional gender roles within the media continue to exist despite a rise in the presentation of women as "spirited, accomplished symbols of female empowerment (Gauntlett, 2002; Hill, 2010). The history of feminist movements is marked by three major waves(Coleman, 2009). . According to the Catherin(1997), the post-feminism is defined by the assumption that feminist movements have succeeded in dismantling oppressive institutions, and so it is up to individual women to make choices that secure these social transformations (Murphy, 2015).

Masculine pronouns become generic pronouns when utilized to refer to men, women, or groups. Their usage, though, has the tendency to cause ambiguity and continue the linguistic marginalization of women. Pronouns such as "he," "his," and "him" are most easily applied to refer to men, male animals, and professions traditionally associated with men, thereby excluding women from the reference. Feminists struggled for linguistic changes, with advocacy for the usage of "them" as a gender-neutral choice for both singular and

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plural.Another factor in this change was the introduction of a new reflexive pronoun, "themselves," as a singular, gender-inclusive substitute by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003, referenced in Mills, 2008). These changes demonstrate how feminists have influenced the evolution of language. Some nouns serve as general terms in addition to pronouns, as "man." Further illustrating gender bias in language, the term "man" is more frequently understood to refer only to men, even though it can also be used to refer to everyone (Naovarattanakorn, 2017).

Numerous facets of how movie posters create and convey signals to their viewers emerge when examining its multimodal components, particularly using Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar. Viewers' interpretations of the characters are greatly influenced by interactional variables including gaze, social distance, and viewpoint. The audience's perception of the power dynamics and feelings expressed in the posters is determined by the gaze, either assertive or receptive. Furthermore, salience and informative value are compositional traits that highlight important components that communicate the main ideas or characters of the movie. For instance, positioning female figures in the poster's center or right section may highlight their significance or present fresh information. Reactors in reactional processes and vectors in transactional imagery aid the viewer in comprehending character dynamics and the plot as it develops. It is evident from theme analysis that movie posters have a significant influence on how society views gender norms and stereotypes. There are examples of resistance and subversion in contemporary depictions of women, even yet stereotypes of them as objectified or subservient persist(Navarro & Adriano, 2024)

A recent study by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) brought to light the long-standing criticism of Bollywood, India's powerful Hindi film industry, for its sexist and backward depiction of gender roles. Although women-led films give some optimism, the mainstream business still primarily depicts males in decision-making roles and women in conventional vocations, according to the study, which examined 25 top-grossing films from 2019 and 10 women-centric films from 2012 to 2019. Additionally, LGBTQ+ and disabled characters are underrepresented in the movies and are frequently portrayed in constrained or problematic ways. Even though the industry claims to represent reality, its portrayals of gender inequity and toxic masculinity—like in Kabir Singh—further mainstream negative behaviors(Pandey, 2023).

Bollywood women of the 1950s were mostly shown in traditional and idealized ways that reflected the social mores of the day, frequently as caring individuals whose primary responsibilities were related to family life. Bollywood limited the visibility of women in public life by reinforcing these idealized portrayals through glitzy visuals, which guaranteed the continuation of traditional gender norms. The more varied and esteemed roles that women played in ancient India are contrasted with this portrayal. These roles were eroded over ages, leading to the restricted, domestic duties that are observed in post-colonial Bollywood. Therefore, the way women were portrayed in Bollywood in the 1950s, as demonstrated in Mother India, served to uphold social standards that limited women to the

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values of motherhood and sacrifice, which were essential in influencing how the general public saw gender roles at the time(Rikigptc_Admin, 2024).

The representation of women in Bollywood cinema has changed tremendously in the past couple of years through the protagonists of movies such as *Queen* (2013), *Piku* (2015), and Thappad (2020) taking charge of their lives, question overriding social norms, and redefine conventional gender roles. Thus, most films continue to convey a predominantly male viewpoint. Though on-screen representation of women has improved, commodification of their identities persists as a problem, as the commercialized nature of the industry occasionally detracts from the profundity and veracity of women's representations. In spite of the advancements made, Bollywood continues to require authentic and diverse portrayals of women in on-screen and off-screen roles (Hindu College Gazette Web Team, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The film *English Vinglish* (2012) portrays the struggles of a middle-class Indian woman, Shashi, who faces linguistic and cultural barriers that impact her self-worth and familial relationships. Her journey of learning English becomes a metaphor for self-empowerment and identity negotiation. This study examines how the protagonist's transformation challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The research problem focuses on understanding how language acquisition influences empowerment and identity construction in diasporic and patriarchal settings.

Research Questions

a. How does the protagonist, Shashi, negotiate her identity through language acquisition in *English Vinglish*?
b. In what ways does the film portray empowerment in the context of gender and cultural identity?
c. How do societal expectations and familial relationships influence Shashi's self-perception and transformation?
d. What role does linguistic competence play in challenging traditional power dynamics in the film?

Research Objectives

a. To analyze the representation of empowerment and self-identity in *English Vinglish*.
b. To explore the impact of language learning on Shashi's self-esteem and personal agency.
c. To examine the film's critique of gender roles and patriarchal structures in Indian society.
d. To understand how linguistic barriers and cultural norms shape identity negotiation in the diasporic context.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using film analysis and interview as the primary data.

Data Collection:

Close reading of *English Vinglish* with a focus on key scenes, dialogues, and character development.

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Review of secondary literature on gender studies, language acquisition, and identity formation in cinema.

Analytical Framework:

Feminist Film Theory: To examine how the film challenges traditional gender roles.

Postcolonial Theory: To analyze the intersection of language, power, and identity.

Discourse Analysis: To study the role of language in empowerment and negotiation of identity.

Scope and Limitations:

The study focuses on *English Vinglish* as a case study and does not generalize findings to all cinematic representations of linguistic empowerment.

It primarily engages with gender and identity within Indian and diasporic contexts.

Methodology

The primary data of this research article has been carried out through interview and secondary data has been taken through reports, research paper and film reviews.

Findings of the movie

The findings and discussion of English Vinglish revolve around its exploration of societal norms, family dynamics, self-worth, and the transformative power of personal growth. Below are the key findings and related discussions:

Findings

Gender and Domestic Roles

The film emphasizes the frequently disregarded roles that women and other homemakers play in traditional Indian households. Shashi's efforts are viewed as ordinary, which undervalues her role as the unifying factor in her family.

The movie's portrayal of gender roles highlights how society tends to favor language proficiency, such as English, as a sign of competence and to undervalue unpaid household work.

Impact of Language on Self-Worth

The movie shows how social standing in metropolitan India is correlated with linguistic ability, especially in English. Shashi's family's condescending attitude stems from her inability to speak English, which undermines her self-esteem.

It highlights the discrimination against non-native English speakers, which is a reflection of English's cultural hegemony in postcolonial societies.

Empowerment Through Self-Discovery

Shashi's choice to learn English covertly represents her path to self-determination. Her change is an example of how education and personal development can improve family dynamics and restore self-worth.

Importance of Support Systems

The multinational, varied English class in New York provides a window into the support and friendship of people from many backgrounds. The importance of empathy, common difficulties, and support from one another is emphasized in this environment.

Family and Emotional Reconciliation

Shashi's family starts to appreciate her sacrifices and recognize her value by the end of the movie. This resolution emphasizes how important it is for family ties to be

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characterized by mutual respect and admiration.

Cultural Reflections

The movie depicts Indian social mores, where housewives are frequently disregarded while playing a vital part in supporting families. It criticizes the fetishization of English as a sign of success and intelligence in middle-class, urban environments.

The film contrasts the critical attitudes prevalent in Shashi's native surroundings with the inclusion of a foreign society by following her journey in New York.

Themes of Feminism and Individuality

By highlighting the significance of appreciating women's contributions and fostering their individuality, Shashi's story quietly advances feminist ideas.

It opposes patriarchal family arrangements that dictate women should stay invisible and subservient.

Language as a Social Barrier

In India, a multilingual nation where many individuals flourish speaking regional languages, the film criticizes the overemphasis on English.Shashi's accomplishment serves as a reminder that acquiring a language should be a means of empowerment rather than a means of undermining one's identity or cultural heritage.

Universal Appeal and Relatability

Because family pressures, cultural expectations, and difficulties with self-esteem are universal, the film's themes are relevant everywhere. It achieves a balance between being generally relatable and culturally distinct.

Critique of Stereotypes

Despite being generally progressive, the movie depends on several clichés that some viewers may find reductive, like the passionate French classmate or the effeminate gay teacher. By resolving disputes in an idealistic way, it also ignores fundamental problems.

An endearing examination of identity, respect, and the quest for human development is English Vinglish. It stimulates conversations about the importance of homemakers, the social effects of language, and the role that self-belief has in overcoming obstacles. Although it presents an inspirational story, its oversimplified resolution may leave more profound systemic issues unresolved, making it an interesting but somewhat romantic depiction of a woman's quest for self-awareness.

Results from a Comprehensive Interview

The following significant findings regarding the influence of the movie English Vinglish were found in a survey of 40 young women in Kathmandu, ages 18 to 30:

Promotion of Independence

Young women are encouraged by the film to forge their own paths and abandon conventional domestic responsibilities. Twenty respondents said that Shashi's story inspired them to follow their goals and make their voices heard in both their personal and professional lives.

## Juggling obligations both inside and outside the home

Based on their personal experiences, 21 respondents related to Shashi's capacity to balance both domestic responsibilities and outside obstacles. Women in Kathmandu, where juggling family obligations and personal development is a typical expectation, found great

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resonance in this dual position.

Effects of Unequal Household Dynamics on Emotions

The responders found great resonance in the depiction of Shashi's husband's lack of assistance with home duties. According to 35 respondents, these kinds of relationships are common and can cause women to feel neglected and upset.

These conclusions demonstrate how the movie empowers young women to question conventional conventions while also reflecting and addressing social and cultural reality.

Impact of English Vinglish movie among Women
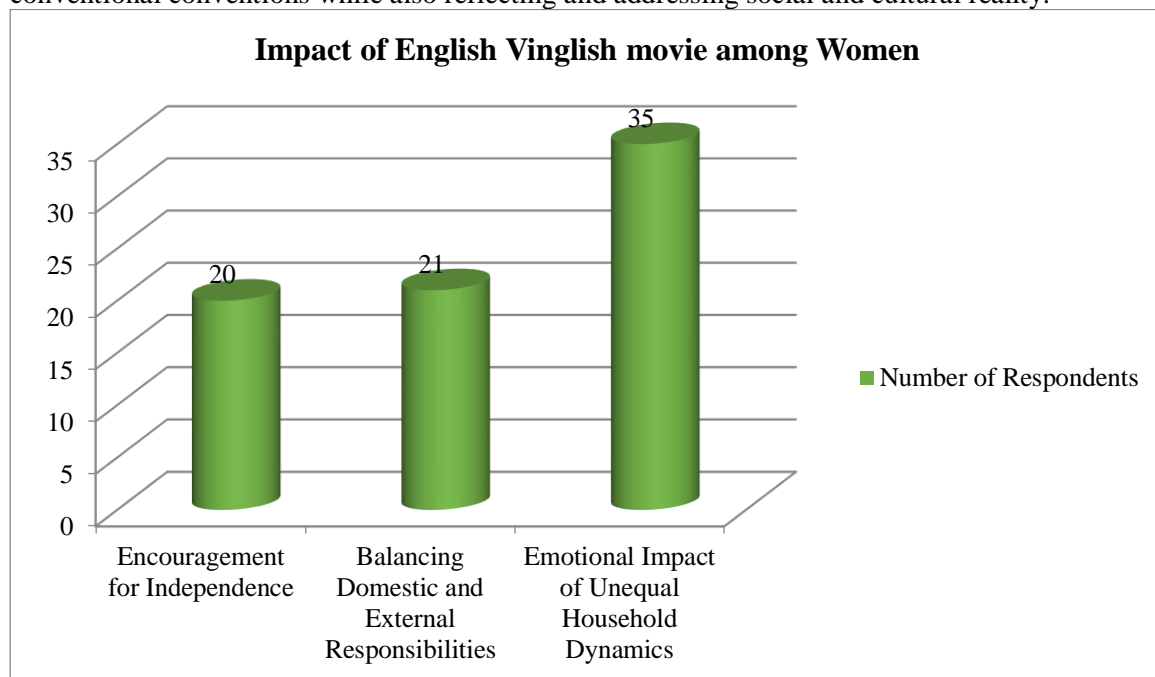
Conclusion

Based on several movie review including *Story Pick, English Vinglish* serves as a reminder that growth is based on acceptance and that big things can come from taking satisfaction in even the tiniest accomplishments. Insisting that we rise beyond pettiness and defend our identity, values, and choices, the movie highlights the significance of not allowing someone to denigrate us. Individual name, goals, and relationships should all be based on love and respect for oneself rather than what society thinks the person should be. Stepping outside of the comfort zone requires a great deal of bravery, but the benefits are life-changing. Dreams drive the path, and lifelong learning turns every day into a chance to better ourselves. The narrative also emphasizes how acts can effectively express love and compassion, demonstrating how true feelings frequently surpass words. Because they are fleeting, life's little, underappreciated moments are worthy of gratitude. The movie eloquently illustrates that learning or pursuing passions, whether they be a new language, culture, or talent, has no age restrictions. Crucially, accepting something new gives your identity more depth and richness rather than erasing it. English Vinglish is a kind reminder

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to value uniqueness, welcome change, and respect all dreams, no matter how great or tiny. The value of self-respect is the most important thing I took away from Shashi (Sridevi). She is a selfless mother and wife, but after being rejected repeatedly by her husband and teenage daughter, she ultimately makes the decision to put herself first by studying English. She seizes the chance with tenacity and diligence, and to everyone's amazement, she delivers a passionate speech about marriage and relationships in flawless English. By doing this, she gains the respect she has always desired and that she is due. Sincere gratitude and support are uncommon in the cutthroat world of today.

According to Sparkie Laurie, one must first become the best advocates for ourselves if we want to experience true happiness. Respecting and loving ourselves lays the groundwork for advancement and affects how we are treated by others. It is impossible to hunt down or buy self-respect, as Whitney Griswold so eloquently stated. We become aware of this in quiet moments when we recognize that we have done the good, served the beautiful, and spoken the truth while knowing it. This reality is best illustrated by Shashi's path, which demonstrates that self-respect starts with having the guts to follow through on your beliefs.

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