
Changing Roles, Changing Perspectives: Portrayal of Widows over the Years in Select Bollywood Films

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Abstract

Indian film industry has been a medium of representation, as it has raised social issues and represented every section of the society. Widows, the second-class citizens of the Indian society, too, have found their representation in films. This paper aims to analyse the portrayal of widows in select Bollywood films and the gradual transformation it went over time. The study is qualitative and descriptive in nature. The paper is based on textual interpretation, where selected films have been critically analysed to show how in an attempt to highlight their marginalisation, Bollywood has stereotyped the widows. It also shows the transformation in their roles. It analyses how the earlier films like *Rivaaj* and *Prem Rog* portray them as weak and docile characters, depended on others, whereas, in women-oriented films like *Water* and *Dor* their portrayal has undergone a change, exploring their inner lives and showing them as strong and bold characters, who assert their identity and fight for a dignified life. The change in their roles has led to a change in perspective of the audience as well.

Keywords: Indian Cinema, Bollywood, Widows, Representation.

Indian Cinema, particularly Hindi Cinema, has a long history of its own. Since its beginning, it has undergone a lot of changes in content, characterisation, etc. In terms of production also the number has increased manifolds. During the black and white era, it produced around 200 films per year (Agarwal, 2014). At present, the Indian film industry is the largest film producing industry in all over the world, with an average production of more than 1000 films per year (Agarwal, 2014; Sharma and Narban, 2016). Bollywood is the largest and most popular film industry in India, producing movies in the Hindi language. It has a huge impact on both the Indian and global audience. Time and again, Bollywood has tried to deal with social issues and raise awareness against mal-practices like dowry, rape,

child-marriage, by portraying the lives of slum-dwellers, transgenders, sex-workers, labourers and Dalits as well.

Widows, the most neglected, the second class citizens of the Indian society have also found representation in Bollywood movies. In India, a widow is generally referred to as *vidhawa*. It is derived from the Sanskrit word *vidh*, which means “be destitute” (Priyadarshini, n.d.). They are considered inauspicious and are believed to bring ill-omen. They are also prohibited from attending auspicious occasions like marriages and child-births. As soon as the husband dies, she is expected to renounce all the earthly things and immerse herself in the worship of God. As Uma Chakravarti claims, the widows are seen as “physically alive” and “socially dead” (1998). They are imposed with restrictions on their clothes, movement and even on their diet. Often seen as burden, these widows are left to the holy cities of Vrindavan, Varanasi or Haridwar by their near and dear ones.

Bollywood has often portrayed the pitiable condition and the sufferings of the widows, trying to bring about a change in the attitude of the people towards them and thereby in their status. But, as Bollywood is majorly male-dominated, the representation of widows and for that matter, of women, is from the male view-point. In doing so, it has, more often than not, stereotyped them. They are always shown in white saris, with no jewellery to beautify them, renouncing all the colourful things of life. The study of the representation of widows in Indian films is still incomplete and occasional, and there are facets of widowhood and lives of widows that need a thorough investigation. The recurring portrayal of widows as villains or victims has limited the scope of analysis of widows as there lies much more to be explored between the extremes. Moreover, the inner world of the widows is still a subject to be properly investigated.

By analysing selected movies from different periods, the paper shows the gradual transformation in the portrayal of widows over the years. For the study, following movies have been taken up – *Rivaaj* (Rao, 1972), *Prem Rog* (Kapoor, 1982), *Khoon Bhari Maang* (Roshan, 1988), *Anjam* (Rawail, 1994), *Water* (Mehta, 2005) and *Dor* (Kukunoor, 2006). Through a detailed analysis of the above-mentioned films the paper will try to show the change in the attitude and behaviour of the widows, while their appearance remains the same and in accordance with the prescribed rules for them in all the periods, thus explicitly highlighting their marginalisation.

The film *Rivaaj* was released in 1972 starring Mala Singha and Sanjeev Kapoor in the lead roles. Shekhar (Sanjeev Kapoor) and Lakshmi (Mala Singha) fall in love with each other and Shekhar wants to marry her. But when Shekhar’s mother comes to know that Lakshmi is a child-widow, she refuses and marries him off to another girl named, Kamla. Meanwhile, Lakshmi, who is unaware that she is a child-widow, comes to know about the fact and starts living the life of a widow. Following events lead to Kamla’s death and Raji

(daughter of Shekhar and Kamla) starts meeting Lakshmi, thinking her to be her mother. Towards the end after seeing Lakshmi's true love for Raji, Shekhar's mother gives her consent to their marriage.

The movie portrays Lakshmi, the child-widow, as a submissive character who accepts the opinions of all, obeys everybody and follows the rules laid down for widows. This is an example of the internalisation of the outdated beliefs and traditions by women. Shekhar and Padma's mothers act as the agents of patriarchy and mouthpieces of the orthodox practices to be followed by widows. When Shekhar questions his mother, "What is the fault of Lakshmi if she is a widow?" (Rao, 1972) His mother replies, "Uska dosh ho ya uske bhagya ka, main vidhwa ko apni bahu nahi bana sakti... tu jin sapno armaano ki baat karta h wo sab pati ki chita me jal jate hain..." (Rao, 1972)

Similarly, at the baby shower ceremony of Padma (Lakshmi's friend), her mother accuses Lakshmi for her presence. She says, "Main puchhti hu iss shubh utsav pe tu aayi kaise?" (Rao, 1972) There are several other incidents in the film, which show the pathetic condition of the widows, portrayed through the character of Lakshmi. She bears the taunts and bitterness of the society without questioning or uttering a word, thinking that being a widow is her fault.

The message of the film comes at the end, when Shekhar and Lakshmi get married and Shekhar's mother while blessing them says "Dil todne se Rivaaj todna achchha hain" (It is better to break traditions than to break hearts.) (Rao, 1972).

Prem Rog is a 1982 Bollywood film that comes with a strong message against the evil practices of the society, the mistreatments towards widows and an individual's fight against these and the society. The film features Rishi Kapoor and Padmini Kolhapuri in the lead roles as Devdhar and Manorama, respectively. Devdhar is in love with Manorama who is talkative and mischievous. As both belong to different class and caste, Devdhar decides not to disclose his love for Manorama. Eventually, Manorama gets married but her husband dies a few days after their marriage and she becomes a widow. The following scene shows a group of widows, summoned to perform widowhood rituals after the husband's death. They blame Manorama for the demise of her husband, who quietly listens to all the blames put on her. They are gathered to perform the tonsure of Manorama, a ritual where the hair of the widow is shaved, to uglify her. But when she pleads them not to do this, they accuse her for disregarding the traditions and say, "Arey waah! Baal nahi katwayegi! Baal nahi katwayegi to Sola-Shringaar karti phiregi?" (Kapoor, 1982). When her mother and uncle try to intervene, Manorama's aunt says, "Thik hi to keh rahi hai bua. Ye sundar kes anarth kar dete hai, anarth" (Kapoor, 1982).

When Manorama goes back to her in-laws, she is raped by her brother-in-law, who says that she is beautiful and her hair is even more beautiful. This incident reiterates the age-old

orthodox belief that widows are needed to be “uglified” as they can be a threat because of their sexuality (Khanna, 2002). The shaving of the head is to de-sexualize and de-feminize them, in order “to make the outward appearance of the widow in harmony with the ideal of renunciation (samnyāsa), that she was expected to follow” (Altekar, 2005). Manorama returns to her home, and her room is shifted to the ground floor. She wears white sari, sleeps on a mat, cooks her own food and eats only one meal in a day. The life of widow that she leads is in total contrast with her previous life. Manorama, who was a bold, assertive, rebellious and out-spoken person, after the death of her husband, becomes submissive, weak and accommodating. In her book, Meera Khanna has mentioned, “Ironically the widow herself is conditioned to accept the daily violation of her dignity as a kind of atonement for some imagined or alleged ‘sin’” (Introduction, 2002).

Devdhar returns from the city and comes to know about Manorama. He is shocked at the transformation she has undergone and on seeing her situation, he questions the age-old beliefs, only to be opposed by villagers and the *Thakurs*. Towards the end we see that in the fight between tradition and reason, reason wins. Both Devdhar and Manorama are shown getting married, circling the sacred fire.

The films of the late 80’s and early 90’s have showed a shift in the portrayal of widows. In the earlier movies while they were shown to be submissive, the movies during these years portrayed them as women seeking revenge from those who had wronged them.

In the film *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), Rekha plays the role of a widow named Aarti Verma. Aarti is a widow, who leads a simple life with her two children. But her life is disrupted by Hiralal (Kader Khan), who murders her father and Sanjay (Kiran Bedi), who is Hiralal’s nephew. The uncle-nephew duo, along with Nandini, plans to get hold of the entire wealth and business by showing false sympathy and love towards Aarti and her children. They convince Aarti to remarry Sanjay. In order to inherit her property Sanjay tries to kill her by throwing her into crocodile-infested river. But his plans fail as the dead body of Aarti is not found. As a result, Sanjay becomes abusive towards the children. Meanwhile, Aarti undergoes plastic surgery and is transformed into a beautiful woman, who is ready to take revenge from the people who disrupted her peaceful life. Towards the end, we see Aarti finishes the career of Nandini as a model, and murders both Hiralal and Sanjay, thus punishing those who disrupted her peaceful life and reuniting with her children.

The film *Anjaam* (Rawail, 1994) stars Madhuri Dixit and Shahrukh Khan in the leads. Shivani, played by Madhuri Dixit, is an air hostess and lives with her sister and brother-in-law. When Vijay Agnihotri (Shahrukh Khan) sees Shivani for the first time, he instantly falls in love with her and wants to marry her. But Shivani gets married to Ashok (Deepak Tijori), which leaves Vijay frustrated. Later, Vijay in the hope of marrying Shivani befriends Ashok and tries to disturb their married life. Following events lead Vijay to murder

Ashok. After the death of Ashok, we see Shivani wearing a white sari. When Vijay asks her to marry him offering *sindoor*, she refuses him by saying, “Vijay Agnihotri, tumhare liye is sindoor ki kimat chahe kuch bhi na ho, magar ye ek suhagan ke liye anmol hai... Aurat ki shadi zindagi me sirf ek bar hoti hai” (Rawail, 1994). In spite of being educated, an air-hostess and quite modern, she further adds, “Iss safed sari ka matlab jante ho? Iska matlab hai ki ek aurat aur uske pati ka rishta kitna pavitra hai. Ye sirf ek safed sari nahi ek vidhwa ka gehna hai” (Rawail, 1994). The film here fails to show a progressive view, rather it reflects the internalisation of the orthodox beliefs by women who take pride in their subjugated position. A well-educated, independent and outspoken woman like Shivani not only follows the orthodox practices but also takes pride in doing so, thereby making the film regressive.

Shivani is shown as caring and sensitive woman in the beginning. But in jail, when she comes to know about the death of her daughter and sister in an accident involving Vijay, she sheds this image of hers. In a feat of rage, she kills the jailor who is responsible for her miscarriage. She then murders Inspector Arjun Singh and goes out in search of Vijay. She finds him in a paralysed state. Thinking it to be unjust to kill a paralysed person, she looks after him and nourishes him back to health and then murders him.

Both these films show the transformation of a woman from mother, the life-giver, to a murderer. The films also fail to convey a message to bring change in society and, in fact, have several instances where the patriarchal beliefs have been reinforced.

However, the films produced in the 21st century are an effort to bring about a change in the perspective of people regarding the widows and reduce the strictness of people towards these practices. The next two films, *Water* and *Dor*, aim to highlight the inhuman rituals and traditional and religious practices that silence the voices of the widows. They also convey a strong message against the idea that widows become sub-human after the death of their husbands. The protagonists of both the films yearn for love and freedom and challenge the customs.

Water is a film by Deepa Mehta released in the year 2005. Set in the pre-independence era in 1938, the movie depicts the miserable condition and explores the suppressed and untold desires of the widows, living at an *ashram* in Varanasi. With a series of events and different lives intertwined together, the film highlights the deplorable condition of widows and the ugly ways of these *ashrams*.

Chuhiya is a carefree and innocent child who is unknown to the fact that her old husband is ill. She becomes a widow at the age of seven. When her husband dies, her father comes to her and asks her, “Yaad hain bitiya jisse tumhara byaah hua tha?” (Mehta, 2005). Chuhiya replies “Naa” (Mehta, 2005). He again says, “Wo nadi ke bhet chad chuka hain. Ab tum vidhwa ho gayi ho” (Mehta, 2005). She then innocently asks him, “Kab tak baba?” (Mehta, 2005). After the death of her husband, Chuhiya is left in the *ashram* by her father,

to

spend the rest of her life in expiation, despite her pleadings and protests. With her, we also enter the dark and bleak insides of the *ashram*, ruled by Madhumati. Kalyani is the young beautiful widow who is forced into prostitution by Madhumati, in order to support the *ashram*, thus revealing the hypocrisy of those who rule these institutions.

Slowly and gradually, she tries to adapt to the ways of the *ashram*, but keeps on questioning about things she does not understand. At one instance, she questions Shakuntala, one of the widows, “Aadmi vidhwa ka ghar kaha hain?”, thereby earning the wrath and disgust of the other widows present there (Mehta, 2005). But it is through these innocent questions about the unjust practices by Chuhiya, as a child, the evils of the customs of society are brought to light. She becomes the mouthpiece of Mehta, who through this movie have tried to bring about a change in the wretched position of the widows.

We see all the widows in the *ashram* follow the rules laid for them. They are always clad in white, heads shaven. They eat only one meagre meal in the whole day. They abstain from oily and spicy food and sweets, observe the prescribed fasts and immerse themselves in the worship of God. But all these hardships do not end their desires.

Bua is the oldest widow in the *ashram*, who craves to eat laddu. In a heart-wrenching scene we see, Chuhiya brings laddu for *Bua* and places it near her. *Bua* wakes up and eats the laddu savouring the taste of it and cries while remembering the day of her marriage when she was served one. Again, when *Bua* is about to die, she asks Shakuntala to take her in the open and cries, “Hame laddu chahiye. Hame laddu chahiye” (Mehta, 2005). Scenes like these are powerful and show the intensity of their sufferings.

Narayan, a man with progressive views, offers to marry Kalyani and take her to Calcutta with him. This kindles the warmth of love in the otherwise desolated life of Kalyani. She experiences love for the first time in her entire life and so despite being a widow, she hopes and dreams to marry him. But Kalyani is opposed and locked up by Madhumati, who fears to lose a source of income. Initially, Shakuntala also opposes the idea of remarriage a widow, as it is against the customs. But when Sadananda, a priest, tells her about the law of remarriage for widows, she stands up for Kalyani and helps her in running away from the *ashram*. Kalyani, in the hope of a new future, leaves the *ashram* and thus, breaks the rule. However, when she comes to know that Narayan’s father is one of her customers, she refuses to marry him. She dies by drowning herself to death when Madhumati denies taking her back.

Shakuntala, meanwhile, comes to know that Madhumati has sent Chuhiya as a replacement for Kalyani. She takes Chuhiya with her to the station to receive the blessings of Gandhiji and desperately asks people to take her away with them. She sees Narayan in the crowd and hands Chuhiya over to him, to let her escape the fate that she and Kalyani have suffered.

The film *Dor* is directed by Nagesh Kukunoor and was released in 2006. It is a story of two women, Zeenat (Gul Panag) and Meera (Ayesha Takia) whose paths cross because of an unfortunate event. Zeenat comes all the way from Himachal Pradesh to Rajasthan to meet Meera and ask forgiveness for her husband, who is charged with the murder of Meera's husband. Meera, who is a widow now, finds herself at the receiving end of the accusations and insults of her in-laws. She is imprisoned in the four walls of her *haveli*, clad in black. She yearns to go back to her previous life and do all the things that she used to do earlier.

Meanwhile, Zeenat, with the help Bahuroopiya, succeeds in finding Meera. She is allowed only to visit the temple as a ritual for widows. Zeenat comes to meet her there but hides her identity from Meera and develops a friendship with her. They share a beautiful and strong bond of friendship together, in which Zeenat, who is independent, enriches Meera's life with her thoughts and Meera for the first time experiences a sense of freedom with her.

Finally, when Zeenat tells her the truth and asks to sign the statement of forgiveness, Meera refuses saying, "Meri zindagi to barbaad kar di na usne, uski qeemat chahiye mujhe" *Dor* (Kukunoor, 2006). She bursts out in front of Zeenat and discloses that she hates the life of a widow and that she is not willing to forgive the person who is responsible for her misfortunes. In the next scene, we see her giving a befitting reply, to her father-in-law, for the first time, when he lectures her on dignity. She is transformed into a different person with whatever she has learned from Zeenat. She fights with her mother-in-law with the help of her grandmother-in-law and runs to the railway station to hand over the statement of forgiveness to Zeenat. To her surprise, Zeenat extends her hand from the moving train, indicating her to come with her. Meera runs towards her and taking her hand boards the train. She finally decides to leave behind her distressed life and start life afresh. The film reinforces the idea of friendship too, by showing how a quiet and submissive widow can stand up for herself, after getting support from other women and becoming aware of her rights.

Thus, the analysis illustrates that films from the earlier era, like *Rivaaj* and *Prem Rog*, present the widows through the male-gaze. They were represented as weak characters, who obediently followed all the rules and conformed to the image of the "*bhadramahila*" (respectable women) (Chatterjee, 1989). The focus was always on the improvement of their status by remarrying them to another man, restating the patriarchal ideologies, in a way. The movies of the later period like *Khoon Bhari Maang* and *Anjaam* show a shift in the representation of the widows. The widows are portrayed as being strong and revengeful. They are sensitive and docile, at first, immersed in their familial roles, but when their home is disrupted, they choose the path of revenge. The New Age movies like *Water* and *Dor* focus on the inner desires of the widows who want to get away from their miserable conditions.

The above analysis also highlights the stereotypical representation of widows in Bollywood. All the films show the widows in almost the same manner. They are shown to

follow a certain dress-code, shunning the objects used for beautification like *bindi*, *gajra*, bangles, etc. Bollywood, by presenting the widows in the conventional roles and attires, have actually consolidated the *image* of the widow in the minds of its audience.

Finally, we can conclude that while the earlier movies showed them as completely home-bound, devoted to their family, and ready to sacrifice, with the coming of women-oriented films, their portrayal has witnessed a significant change in recent times. These films present them in more realistic and unconventional roles. The portrayal of the widows in both, *Water* and *Dor*, shows that they can be rebellious, break barriers and defy the societal norms to follow their hearts. These New Age movies posit a challenge to patriarchy by articulating the female desires. They focus on the widows' inner lives, their suppressed desires and foreground their pains and silent sufferings to sensitize the audience towards them and bring a change in their perspective.

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