

1. Inverted Gaze and Altered Erotic Spectacle

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Abstract:

In primitive law of social organization, a woman is defined as a symbol of exchange between men and as an object of possession which is extended to the representation of women in paintings and later in photography and cinema. In cinematic representations, according to feminist film theory, it is the male protagonist who actively dominates the screen and the gazes while the female character, though essential for the narrative, is portrayed as a passive bearer of the gaze. The female body, as a spectacle, offers voyeuristic pleasure to the male spectator. But with the turn of the century, an inversion of the power equation in the dominant discourse of representation has taken place. With the advent of post-modernity and the concept of sex for sale, eroticized male body has appeared in the ambit of representation which is also a product of consumerist capitalism where every aspect of life is segmented to form separate consumer entities. This paper tends to look at popular Hindi films that are released in the recent past where the male body is offered as an eroticized spectacle. Interestingly, this kind of representation of the male body has also given rise to the concept of the metro-sexual man and a desire for mesomorphic body enhanced with all cosmetic products, promoting consumerism. The paper bases its analysis on Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure and I attempt to apply it on the re-imagination of sexuality in cinematic spaces. The paper also examines the consumer spaces where the homo-sexual communities occupy substantial space as target audience which has enough potential to determine the direction and success of any popular cultural medium.

Keywords:

Sexuality in cinematic spaces; Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure; Cinema; Gaz,, Gender; Male body; Objectification; Pleasure; Representation

Introduction

Sexuality is a mirage in itself or rather it is a term too complex to be explained through categorization. With changing time, the world has witnessed the fluidity of this magic term and it has expressed itself in various forms in every aspect of life and society. In a real world, everybody is an erotic spectacle to the other. Everyone is subjected to a gaze of desire of one or the other individual. But when it comes to visual representation, especially through cinematic apparatus, the domain of being spectacle has always been allotted to women.

In cinematic representation, according to the feminist film theories, it is the male protagonist who actively dominates the screen as well as the gaze. As Lévi-Strauss says that in primitive law of social organization, woman is defined as a symbol of exchange between men and as an object of possession, which is extended to the representation of women in paintings and later in photography and cinema. All of these reflect and sanction the reification and commodification of female sexuality in the symbolic realm as a value to be bought and sold in the ambit of reality and economics. But the concept of “only female” sex for sale does not hold true in this consumerist era, as sexuality itself has become an item of exhibition that can be consumed and produced commercially.

In visual representation, the female body is usually offered as a spectacle to provide voyeuristic pleasure or her lack of phallus is used to provoke castration anxiety within the male spectator which is sadistically gratified by the on-screen punishment of the female protagonist or by forgiving her. Thus the representation of sexuality is a dialectic process within the power structure which reifies the power posited by the masculine over and against the feminine.

The turn of the century has witnessed a radicalization or inversion of the power equation in the dominant discourse of representation. Eroticized exhibition is not restricted to female body anymore but male body too has made its appearance in this arena, where the male character, in a narrative, not only engenders narcissistic identification but also becomes an erotic spectacle and a fetishized object. Advancement in Information and Communication Technologies along with proliferation of virtual dwelling has propagated the fluidity in gender norms or rather altered the understanding of gender. Humans are no longer confined to the binaries of male and female or heterosexual and homosexual but ‘cyborgs’ (Haraway, 1991) can be anything and everything at a time.

Consumerist capitalism, encompassing the entire global population, the homosexual has become an important consideration for commoditized representation. Thus, queer ideologies form an essential part of visual portrayal, today. Queer representation, according to me is not about representing gays and lesbians, rather it is the representation where spectacles are constructed in accordance with the homosexual spectator or in other words, a representation that caters beyond the hetero-normative realm. For example, “My Beautiful Laundrette” deals with a serious issue of assimilation where the main protagonists are gays, but I doubt its categorization as Queer cinema. On a similar note, the advertisement for Cinthol soap, endorsed by Hrithik Roshan, depicts his body as a fetishized object where the camera caresses his torso to provoke desire. This kind of representation along with some more in the line, such as Jockey, Calvin Klein jeans, question the dominant discourse of visual representation and tend to alter the sexual subjectivities.

Since my paper is regarding Hindi cinema, I will try to restrict myself to popular Hindi cinematic representation of the male body.

Nude Bodies of Men: Male Body Objectified

The two films, Om Shanti Om and Saawariya, released on the same day in 2007, showcase the nude bodies of ShahRukh Khan and Ranbir Kapoor respectively. These representations of the sexed bodies of the male protagonists accompanied by striptease and sexually provocative gestures were certainly not meant for the gaze of the masculine spectator but provide visual pleasure for the female gaze and also operate beyond the heterosexual normativity. In the song Jab se tere naina, Ranbir Kapoor's body represents an outside figure which operates freely beyond the spatial, bodily and moral bounds of the society, offering pleasure. His erotic moving body symbolises a changing sexual culture. The representation of male body becomes subversive in certain ways. ShahRukh Khan's Om Shanti Om also operates within a pleasure economy. His performative act in the song Dard-e-disco, is principally centred on the male body, symbolising a different erotic genre. The embodied performances in the two songs particularly, subvert notions of a dominant male gaze, mutate hegemonic masculinity, question hetero-normative categories and undermine prescribed gender spaces and fixed gender representations. These songs operate extra-diagetically and appear out of context. The nude bodies of man can offer contradictory, variable and ambivalent possibilities. At one level they endorse masculinity but their masculinity is different from the traditional, hegemonic masculinity. They promote masculinity with stylish, waxed male bodies, enhanced with multiple beauty products, thus catering to the consumerist capitalism. At another level, their bodies question the dominant assumptions about masculinity. Ranbir Kapoor is an appropriate example for this. The masculinity in display, in his case, is almost feminine. His lean body, draped in scanty towel, actively invites the viewers to linger upon and as the camera caresses his body, it attracts female attention and is a delight for women's as well as homosexual gaze. As Laura Mulvey suggests that gaze of the characters towards each other in a film subordinates the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the spectators, it is observable in the film Jodha Akbar, though it refutes the suggestion about dominant male gaze. In this film, Aishwariya Rai is seen to enjoy voyeuristic pleasure by peeping through a curtain and looking at the nude body of Hrithik Roshan, who practises sword-fighting. Here, the gaze of the female protagonist dominates the screen thereby suggesting that the filmic gaze can belong to women as well.

Interestingly, this kind of representation of the male body has given rise to the notion of metrosexual man and a desire for mesomorphic body, nurtured by cosmetic usage, promoting consumerism. Men spend more time in front of mirror and spend more funds for grooming, crossing the boundaries of manliness as being cautious about appearance used to be the attribute of women. The marketing of men's beauty products and their endorsement by celebrities and also the storyline of the advertisements of such products indicate the trend of reversal of the gender roles where men,

too urge to become erotic spectacle. The advertisement of Fair and Handsome shows the disappointment of a man as he is unable to attract female gaze and he finally solves his problem by applying Fair and Handsome that enables him to fulfil his desire to be looked at.

Case Study

Presence of penis, may invoke penis-envy on the part of female spectator but the portrayal through fetishized objectification subverts this possibility thereby creating delight. An interesting case study, that contains all the elements of Laura Mulvey's analysis of the female spectacle and male gaze, would be a popular film, Anjaana Anjaani, but it reverses the gender roles. In this movie, the male protagonist is passive though he is an essential part of the narrative. Kiara, played by Priyanka Chopra becomes the active protagonist who dominates the incidents on the screen space. The narrative not only interchanges the gender roles in terms of the gaze but the plot of the story assigns reverse gender roles to the characters. Aakash (Ranbir Kapoor) is portrayed as a calm, shy man who is hard-working while Priyanka Chopra plays the role of a carefree, easy going girl who is brave and dares to do everything. In the story, Aakash is dependent on the woman protagonist financially as he has lost everything for repaying a debt. In the process of living under the shelter of Kiara, Aakash is seen doing household chores whereas Kiara loves to stay in a messy ambience. In the matter of gaze, the body of Ranbir Kapoor is offered as spectacle in different parts of the film. Female fetishism is absent in the film. In a sequence, Ranbir is shown coming out of bathroom and water droplets falling from his body. The sequence is dominated by the active gaze of the female protagonist who looks at him through a mirror. The camera caresses his body through close-ups of different parts and provoking sexual desire by focusing on water droplets on the body. Here, the appearance of the nude body of the hero freezes the narrative and the fetishized representation tends to generate a desire of possession which is only quenched when he is possessed by the heroine. The total objectification of the male body in this film might be a reason for the craze of Ranbir Kapoor among female spectators and also disgust of many male spectators towards him.

Similarly, many other films in the popular genre have taken up such showcasing of sexed male bodies along with continued objectification of female body. Films like Dostana present the male protagonist as a spectacle to cater to a certain kind of eroticism along other spices that cook up a Bollywood film, thereby making the commodification of sexuality in the cultural industry evident.

Conclusion

Consumerism is the most powerful and the most egalitarian outcome of capitalism that has engulfed each and every aspect of life of one and all. Thus, it has generated a segmented lifestyle forming separate consumer entities. The strata of the society that were ignored earlier because of the ascribed categorization of the Indian society form important target audience and occupy crucial

places in the consumer spaces. The cultural industry is one of the busiest capitalist junctions that manufactures popular culture and also moulds, innovates and reinstates social norms. As we know, sexualities and sexual identities emerge in diverse ways. Classical Psychoanalytic theory or feminist theories ignore the commercial aspect of cinema. In the process of digging into in-depth analysis, these theories leave out larger aspects of human subjectivity, eventually becoming largely hetero-normative. The Oedipus complex, which is still assumed to be universal, takes up a heterosexual position leaving no place for notions of lesbian, gay and bisexual sexualities as mature or creative (Ellis, 2007). The complete surrender of Hindi cinema to market forces and its offering of male sexuality as an object of desire is a radical rupture in the usual narrative structure. This genre of film making interrogates patriarchal normativity, catering beyond the heterosexual regime, thus questioning the existing social dogmas. It might not be a revolution to change the society; rather a tool for profit but it does subvert certain hypocrisy and makes consumption of popular culture more equitable.

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