

Women and Their Portrayal in Indian Cinema

Mana Tabatabai Rad

Faculty of Arts, Department of Sociology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India
mana.rad93@gmail.com

Abstract

In this study we aim to analyze women's portrayal in Indian cinema by applying the sociological approach which focuses on agency. We want to investigate the interrelation of gender, women and cinema in the context of two Indian films Daman by Kalpana Lajmi and Mrityudand by Prakash Jha. This is a qualitative research which took the form of narrative method for analyzing the selected films. After describing the position of women in Indian society and the evolution of Indian cinema with special attention to emergence of women directors and representation of women on screen, we outlined the plot of both films and then the description of the sub-theme of agency is discussed. These films portray women both as victimized and empowered ones.

Keywords: Women, Indian Films, gender studies, society, art, cinema.

1. Introduction

Gender typically refers to the social process of dividing up people and social practices along the lines of sexual identities (Beasley, 2005). It identifies a set of qualities and behaviors expected from females or males by society. The concept of gender was adopted in order to emphasize the social construction of masculinity and femininity and social ordering of relations between women and men. By the mid-1980s the purview of masculinity studies and femininity had substantially shifted from women's studies to the study of gender, namely analysis of the ways in which all aspects of human society, culture and relationships are gendered (Kandiyoti, 1996). Lorber (1994) defines gender as an all pervasive social institution that establishes a pattern of expectations for individuals, orders the processes of everyday life, is built into the major social organizations of society such as the economy, ideology, the family and politics and is also an entity in and of it. The sociological view explores gender roles. Gender roles are the roles that society assigns to men and women based on their gender. They affect how people perceive and expect themselves and others to behave in masculine and feminine manner. These roles are learned through socialization and are culturally determined. Social norms and values are internalized by children as they learn their social roles and the produced view of gendered individuals (Jackson and Scott, 2002). Gender is not simply about what we are as a male or female but also what we are doing in our encounters with one another. It is constructed through performance and interaction between people.

The medium of cinema representing social and historical practice regarding gender approach is a crucial phenomenon in sociological studies. It can be said that media are crucial in the construction of gender ideologies and in gender socialization. Products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our identities, our sense of selfhood, our construction of ethnicity, race and nationality, of sexuality and of 'us' and 'them' (Dines and Humez, 2003). Film and cinema are the most commonly used mass media to communicate with the public. The fact that cinema is a mediator of social realities and personal dreams, collective concerns and individual aspirations make it assume a seminal dimension as a humanistic discourse which has the potential to redirect the cultural and material fabric of our everyday lives (Jain and Rai, 2002).

Women's position within media power structures and media representation of women are persistent concerns in every society, because negative stereotyping and lack of female input both reflect and reinforce wider gender inequalities. Films, indeed in the most effective manner maintain the diffusion of traditional female gender roles, which women are depicted in culture and society. Research on gender and cinema has emphasized the question about women's identity. In fact, the study of the images of women in cinema were a central concern of the 'second wave' feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, criticizing women's image in film and women's roles in the film industry (Jackson and Jacjie, 1998).

There is a fundamental transformation in the position of women in modern India with the various reform movements and a gradual change in the perception of women in society. Clearly women have made great progresses towards equality in recent decades. Women have played a significant role in the social and political structure of India. India with its rich

heritage through history and culture has been a remarkable country showing great advancement in the field of art. One of the most popular forms of art is Indian drama and cinema. In the 1970s Indian Cinema developed a more socially aware and more politically orientated form of cinema, partly subsidised by public funding, which was known as Parallel Cinema – running alongside but clearly distinguished from mainstream cinema. Women's image, status and role as a social issue in society are reflected in cinema in India and have been present in even in popular Indian cinema almost right from the start.

The representation of women in cinema has been a major issue of debate amongst feminist film theorists in India. The complex and fascinating relationship between women and cinema has a substantial literature and some interesting work on third world feminism, which illuminates aspects of the representation of women in Indian films. The representation of women and the representation by women on screen are essential for understanding the interplay between women and cinema in India (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998). For analyzing the position and representation of women within power and gender relations in a patriarchal society, we need to consider the role of agency in women's lives. "agency" refers to the capacity of individual humans to act independently and to make their own free choices. Agency, thus, generally refers to micro level actors and to macro level collectives that act. In other words, any social being, whether an individual or a collective, can be considered to have agency. (Ritzer, 2005).

Accordingly, in the proposed study we have tried to analyze women's portrayal in Indian cinema by applying the sociological approach that focuses on agency. The general purpose of this study is to investigate the interrelation of gender, women and cinema in the context of two Indian films *Daman* in Hindi - directed by Kalpana Lajmi (2001) and *Death Penalty- Mrityudand* in Hindi – directed by Prakash Jha (1997). The choice of the films was based on the fact that these films are comparable to each other having some similar issues to study. Mainly this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- How do films show the domination and stereotyping of women in Indian society?
- How do films represent agency aspects of women's lives?
- How does Indian cinema integrate and interpret women's agency and subjectivity in films?

2. Review Literature

Considering the subjects of gender, cinema and society is important. It is surprising to find that there is relatively less literature on the said topics. Also notably whatever material is available is primarily from USA and very little work has been done in India. Here, we would like to discuss the writings specifically in the context of the Hindi film industry popularly known as Bollywood.

Mayne (1981) analyzed women's cinema as having two definitions. The first would be those films made by women and the second refers to female audience in Hollywood products. She focused on the issue of the relationship between the inauthentic and the authentic portrayals of female experience as also on women's relationship traditionally and historically as filmmakers and as film consumers. She worked mostly on classical Hollywood films throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, especially on the works of women directors like Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino. She found that women function as objects of spectacle and projection of male

fantasies in classical cinema. She focused on the public and private spheres of women's life, the public including cinema as a field of business and industrial production along with the social institutions related to them, and the private containing home, family and personal life of the character. Using the feminist theory she explored how women interact within the private and public realms.

A study by Shohat (1990) analyzes “oriental” films, which either are stories about the orient, stories located in the orient or at least have some oriental characters in them. Such movies provide us with Hollywood's view of the orient, especially the view of gender (woman) as a product of the western male gaze. Such kind of films show veiled women as a metaphor for their land, which is ripe for western domination, because east is characterized as the other and west as Ego. For instance, in Hollywood films like *Ishtar* (1987) and *Lawrence of Arabia*, oriental women characters are under the power of western men. Similarly, colonized women are under the protection of the colonial patriarchal figure and they are an object of spectacle for the western voyeuristic gaze. The sexual hierarchy shown in these films additionally indicates a western racial view, which occupies the centre of the narrative by white women and men. The white woman is desired by the male protagonist and the darker marginalized women appear as sexually subordinated. It should be noted that in these oriental films the traditional sexual role and gender hierarchies are marked by the domination of the western men.

Similar views are presented by the researchers who have worked on the Hindi cinema. Datta (2000) examined the concept of cultural identity and personalized nationality with implications on gender through media and film. The main question in her study was about how larger ideological forces and market forces impact process of gender presentation in Indian cinema. She mentioned that in the 1980s with the coming of satellite television, the worldview changed. Narrative cinema was inundated by the overriding image of women as being dominated by masculine ideals of representation such as muscular body and physical aggression and it also presented conservative ideology in valorizing the male and objectifying the female. At the end of the twentieth century globalization has represented the interests of the free market for all the people. This transition and using of nation as a family paradigm has located women in subordinate positions, confined to domestic and motherly roles. The process of globalization simplifies image making from a historical or social context. But she believed that women's movement and struggle for an egalitarian society brought women from the margins to the centre of their texts and focused on female subjectivity. Some filmmakers such as Aparna Sen, Vijaya Mehta and Aruna Raje have shown portraits of protagonist women highlighting their social and sexual identity.

Butalia (1984) stated that the most powerful medium of communication in Indian society is commercial Indian cinema. Many directors have produced films about women's social issues and paid attention to some important women's issues such as marriage, widowhood, dowry and rape. This has shown that the role of women has become more visible on the screen. But it should be noted that in spite of films concerning women's issues being made, we can see only one film in every 100 that shows women as human beings in their own right. Most commercial films continue to portray women as sex objects and as unequal partners. She suggested that Indian cinema should focus more on balancing women's image and avoid the same stereotypes.

Anu Celly (cited in Jain and Rai, 2002) has analyzed aspects of women's representation in "Indian popular cinema". Using semiotic and psychoanalytical approaches she pointed that the image of women is not the reality in their life. On the contrary, women's functions are factors of myth, custom and ritual. She also believes that the victimization syndrome is a component of women's image and life history and usually gazes of the male protagonist control and limit women's subjectivity and sexuality in to an object. For instance even a film like Satyajit Ray's "Devi" which is seen as a kind of revolutionary and pioneering attempt to show women's image as a protagonist, there is a use of myth as a normative paradigm for the ideal construct of womanhood.

Chatterji (1998) has written a book entitled *Cinema Object: Woman: A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema*. This book is perhaps, the first attempt by an Indian film critic within the framework of Indian popular cinema and was the result of three years of intensive research, through films, books and documentation consisting of archival material on Indian cinema. The idea was rooted in a consistent thrashing of ideas and concepts attacking the patriarchal dominance in Hindi popular cinema through articles written in Indian publications and papers presented at seminars on cinema over the past two decades. It is an emotional response to the portrayal of women in Indian cinema based on psycho-analysis, semiology and structuralism. It has sought to place Indian popular cinema in perspective along sociological lines where the subjects of mythology, marriage, adultery, prostitution, rape, suicide and male masquerade have been analyzed through the glasses of an Indian woman addicted to cinema and to women.

Supriya Agarwal (cited in Jain and Rai, 2002) has provided an analysis of the Muslim women's identity in films. She argued that in Hindi cinema between in the 1970s to 1990s the portrayal of woman was projected through stereotypes and the women's point of view was never included in her role. This also holds true for the projection of Muslim women as members of a minority community marginalized in society. They are placed in stereotypes and with little choice in their own lives. In her study she analyzed four Muslim women centered films – Pakeezah (1971), Nikaah (1982), Bazaar (1982) and UmraoJaan (1982). In these films we can see that a secondary position is imposed on women by strong environmental forces of society and they are shown to be oppressed by various societal pressures. In fact, women are presented from the male point of view in that they cannot have a respectable or independent identity without being under the protection and control of men. Men are portrayed as strong, powerful and authorized. On the contrary, women are depicted as weak and powerless and have to submit to male authority. She suggested that by formatting a counter hegemonic feminist discourse, all these problems need to be challenged and discussed.

Uberoi (1990) analyzed representation of women in Indian popular art. She has mentioned in her study that women's representation has two processes. The first is the commoditization of women and second is the tropising of the feminine within an overall cultural context that is both homogenizing and hegemonic. She noted that in many genres of presentation in social and cultural activities, women are prominent objects of male desire and potential possessions. She analyzed two main reasons for their invisibility both in society and in media. On the one hand, because of marginalization of women in patriarchal discourse, they have never been allowed to make their full and proper contribution to society and on the other hand society's

legitimizing myths and authority have been controlled by males, while women have been possessed and exchanged in the social relations among men. She showed different aspects of modification/objectification of women and women's bodies in related media such as advertising, film and etc. She believed that the Indian culture and stereotypes have affected women's role in society. The national culture and modern period has seen 'womanliness' subjected to process of hegemonization and homogenization of its identity. The mass media catering to the demands of the market mechanism have been the active instrument of this transformation.

3. Research Method

With the purpose of data collection in the qualitative research we have chosen the narrative method for analyzing the selected films, where we have also tried to study the two stories in certain cultural and social contexts. The choice of the films was based on the fact that these two films are comparable to each other having some similar issues to study. They belong to art house cinema and they are nationally and internationally acclaimed. The films are women-centered and mostly have concentrated on women's issues in different situations, especially in the gender relations context. In these films we can see various aspects of women's lives, and the challenges which they have to face in Indian social contexts. These films also show how women can break the social and the cultural boundaries which they were constrained by.

4. Indian Films under Study: *Daman and Mrityudand*

4.1. *Daman* directed by Kalpana Lajmi

Among all of Lajmi's cinematic works, it is in *Daman* (2001) that she questions marital rape, an undiscussed topic in Indian society and Indian films. *Daman*, meaning dominance, is by no means a run of the mill Hindi film. It dares to tackle the hard-hitting subject matter of domestic violence and marital rape.

Daman tells the story of a young woman who is subjected to years of physical and psychological torture at the hands of her husband. *Durga* is a low caste girl married off to a sadist husband *Sanjay Saikia* who is a wealthy tea plantation owner. *Sanjay Saikia* is a pervert and there is nothing decent about him. He is shown as a very one-dimensional person whose only motive in life seems to make everyone's life miserable. From the first day he does everything to humiliate and degrade his wife and while she pines for him he is busy having a good time with another woman. All attempts of *Durga* to be nice and pleasant to her husband are met with sneers and violence. His idea of showing his love to his wife is scorching her with hot candle wax, disfiguring her face with lipstick and remorselessly raping her. In that mad house the only source of comfort for *Durga* is her brother-in-law, Sunil who unlike his elder brother is gentle and cultured and the only one who seems to understand *Durga*. Yet he cannot do much for her. A silent relationship does build up between *Durga* and Sunil, but there are no signs of physical proximity between the two. *Kalpana Lajmi* has very tenderly shown their relationship where there are repressed passions but nothing beyond that.

When *Durga* gives birth to a baby girl, Sanjay refuses to acknowledge her as his daughter. He had wanted a boy, another social issue sandwiched in between by the director. With Sunil's unspoken support and for the sake of her daughter, *Durga* is willing to endure all the pain and

the humiliation. However, things continue like that until Sanjay in a fit of temper decides to marry off his 14-year-old daughter. Sunil protests and in turn is brutally murdered by his brother who throws him in the gushing river. *Durga* is completely shattered with this incident and manages to run away with her daughter to *Gauhati* where an elderly woman gives her and her daughter shelter. Time passes by, but Sanjay soon finds them both and when he tries to lure the daughter back to him by bequeathing all his property to her, she refuses. Furious at being refused and rejected he tries to kill his daughter, but *Durga* emerges as a raging lioness and the immense strength of Goddess *Durga* helps her keep the resolve of not allowing her daughter to suffer the same fate as her. *Daman* depicts women's suffering due to male subjugation and domination. It is a film that highlights the important problem of domestic violence which is a stigma on any society. The film focuses on the dark side of the institution of marriage and conveys the trauma of a victim of marital rape. It brings to light the oppressive conditions of a married woman's life in an arranged marriage. The film portrays how a woman can be physically and emotionally exploited by her husband and shows violence as an indicator of social structure while also offering women's agency as a response to domination. As the film shows, the protagonist despite her subjugation has certain strength to rise above her situation, revolt against her husband and finally get out of a helpless situation even if it means killing him. The film indicates the essential point that women should be able to stand up against domination and fight for their rights (Khan, 2004).

4.2. *Mrityudand* directed by Prakash Jha

Prakash Jha has won eight national awards including the National Award for the Best Feature Film on Social Issues. Among his cinematic works one movie (*Mrityudand*) has been selected for this study. *Mrityudand* (Death penalty) is a Hindi film released in 1997. It was directed and produced by *Prakash Jha*. *Mrityudand* is a *Bihari* story of three village women revolting against their husbands and ultimately rushing to their doom. The plot revolves around three women, *Ketki*, *Chandravati* and *Kanti*. *Ketki* and *Chandravati* are sister-in-laws while *Kanti* is a servant. *Tirpat Singh*, a contractor, gets involved with *Ketki*'s husband *Vinay* and soon, murders him due to some complications. *Ketki* witnesses *Kanti* being exploited by *Tirpat*. *Chandravati*, who is neglected by her husband *Abhay Singh* falls in love with *Ram Baran* (*Om Puri*), a Dalit and becomes pregnant. The film shows three women, who have gone through a lot of ordeal in their lives, deciding to rebel against the society. The villagers severally punish their rebellious behavior. They get the ultimate punishment. They get death sentence.

The film is set in the fictional village of *Bilaspur*, Bihar in 1996. The movie starts with the grisly portrayal of a mob killing of two defenseless women, orchestrated by vested interests, and how village power players later evade administrative inquiries into this atrocity. This incident sets the tone for much of the rest of the movie. It is a film which subtly weaves several sub-plots into itself. The underlying story of the film is about *Ketki* who gets married to the younger son *Vinay* of landlord whose fortunes have been consumed and who now lives on past glory.

This movie tells the story of a family beset by financial troubles brought on, in part, by the machinations of a corrupt politician and a vicious, thieving businessman. They are quickly plunged into the midst of machinations by several powerful and unscrupulous villagers.

Foremost among them is contractor *Tirpat*, a powerful, corrupt and ruthless man who oppresses poor people and especially women with impunity. *Vinay* too becomes influenced by *Tirpat*, and under this influence spirals down a dark road of domestic abuse, alcoholism, and selfishness that alienates his loving wife and tears apart the whole family, despite her best efforts to fight this. The village is ruled by the contractor and broker *Tripat*, aided by the local politician Pandey. Rambaran (Om Puri) is a lower caste merchant who has been giving loans to the landlord's family. When the businessman – *Tirpat*, the film's unequivocal bad guy – schemes to murder the local *pandit*, the new owner of a valuable quarry, namely, *Chandravati*'s husband *Abhay* Singh takes the *pandit*'s place. This leaves his younger brother *Vinay*, a newly-married aspiring contractor, in charge of the property and ripe for manipulation. *Tirpat*'s schemes bring ruin to *Vinay* and threaten his blissful marriage to *Ketki*.

Apart from portraying the internal politics of caste and economics running in the village which has one foot in the past and one foot in the present, this film discusses emotional and physical violence against women. The eldest sister-in-law *Chandravati* is the long suffering wife of *Abhay* Singh the eldest son of the family. For 17 years of their marital life she has been emotionally and physically abused by *Abhay*, who loses no opportunity to remind her of being a *banjh* (sterile woman). To escape the drudgery at home and to regain clout, *Abhay* Singh murders the temple head, the *pandit* and gets himself ordained as his successor. The result is that he gives up all worldly pleasures and leaves his wife. After a life-threatening illness, she finds comfort in the arms of a family friend, the low caste Rambaran.

As *Vinay* struggles to keep the household going, *Ketki* aides him to start off his own entrepreneurial venture as a contractor, but soon *Vinay* becomes a pawn in the hands of *Tripat* and Pandey. It is the beginning of the end for him as he starts physically and emotionally abusing *Ketki*. In the meantime, Rambaran talks sense to *Vinay* and makes him see the fact that he is being taken for a ride. Rambaran's daily visits to *Chandravati* bring them closer and, as their relationship turns sexual, *Chandravati* discovers she is not sterile. *Vinay* in the meanwhile has taken care of things at home and got back at *Tripat*. Even *Ketki* comes back to him, but *Tripat* has *Vinay* killed to regain his power.

Meanwhile, *Ketki*'s maid *Kanti* faces travails of her own. She is forced to give herself to *Tripat*'s men to repay her husband's debts to him. However, inspired by *Ketki*, the sisters-in-law and an army of other women terrorized by *Tirpat* and his cronies stand up and fight against the subjugation they have endured. The rest of the movie deals with their efforts to break out of this morass, both within their relationship as well as outside of it, and *Vinay*'s and especially *Ketki*'s long, hard, and bloody struggle to confront and defeat the forces of oppression and male domination in the village. The film ends with a melodramatic showdown, a literal battle of the sexes, which leaves no doubt that justice has been done, though with a price.

Mrityudand is a film that straddles the art-house and mainstream filmy universes. It is used as a microcosm of the decadent landlord culture. The landlords are just coming to terms with the new class politics that through the reservation policy puts them at an advantage. It is the story of class conflict immersed in the economic power games being played by power brokers and middlemen at the grassroots level. Additionally, the film is a commentary on social and

gender injustice and social problems. *Mrityudand* is a film that attacks the very concept of male dominance in a relationship and in the society. The film states that it's the man's virility and animal strength that makes him attack a woman, but affirms that what is more important is the upbringing of the man. *Prakash Jha's Mrityudand* witnessed a new face of the educated Indian women, willing to rebel and fight for her rights.

5. Portrayal of Women in the study Films through Agency

After looking at the general plots of the films *Daman* and *Mrityudand*, in the following section we examine the twin processes of Indian women having agency in representation in cinema. We will see how gender is organized by culture and interrelated within larger social relations; how Indian culture and tradition affect women and their status in society; what is the level of women's agency and submissiveness through their interaction's patterns; how cultural beliefs and interactional patterns have formed women's representation in cinema; and what kind of characters are represented in the selected films specifically in the area of power and autonomy of women. The important point is how cinema reflects those mentioned facts and shows woman as a victim or as an agent. The subjects of empowerment, decision making, education, rebellion, participation are the themes related to agency.

5.1. Education

The rise of feminist ideas has led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world in recent times. Access to education has been one of the most pressing demands of these women's rights movements. Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women, the greatest single factor which can incredibly improve the status of women in any society. Education enables women not only to gain more knowledge about the world outside of her hearth and home but helps her to get status, positive self-esteem, and self-confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face challenges in life that social structure throws at her.

Since the prehistoric times women were denied opportunities and had to suffer due to the hegemonic masculine ideology. This unjustifiable oppression had resulted into a movement that fought to achieve the equal status of women all over the world. Women's education in India is the consequence of its progress and it has led to the tremendous improvement in women's condition. More importantly, it has helped bolster the agency of women.

In *Daman* the director pays great attention to the topic of education of women. When Durga's husband finds her after she has left him and wants to take their daughter with him she talks to her husband about equal right between man and woman and importance of women's education. She asserts that *"My friend and I were discussing marriage and studies. She was telling me how liberal her husband is. He believes in equal rights for man and woman in marriage. And I told my friend that I too wanted to finish my studies but you refused. Now no one will come in my child's way. She will have every right to complete her education and choose her own husband. She will not be like me"*. In this film we can see that Durga's husband wants his daughter married at an early age without completing her studies. Durga feels angry and says that *"I just want Deepa to have a bright future now. I want her to complete her education, to ensure that I am ready to do any work"*.

In the second film *Mrityudand*, the protagonist is an educated woman who gets married after receiving her college degree. She has a strong character and manages different situations of familial and public relations in her village community. Although in this film there is no direct focus on the subject of the education of women yet it is quite clear that it is Ketki, an educated woman who is the first woman to rebel against the patriarchal system and it is she who motivates the other women to join her in this fight against male domination. Thus in both films although women's education is not a focal issue, yet its importance is depicted.

5.2. Decision Making and Participation

In most societies males make the important decisions in the family and in the society. In the family as well as in the society the decision making power is denied to the women that makes women voiceless, destroys their self-confidence and causes them to feel less important in the family as well as in the society. In India too, a large percentage of women do not have decision making power. They cannot make decisions independently, not even related to their own life. They have to take permission of male members for each and every issue, be it their education, marriage, or their children.

Autonomy is the ability to obtain information and make decisions about one's own concerns. It facilitates access to material resources such as food, land, income and other forms of wealth, and social resources such as knowledge, power, prestige within the family and community (Acharya et al., 2010). Limitations to women's physical, sexual, economic, social and political autonomy may affect women's decision-making processes. On the contrary if the women attain this autonomy, it becomes a source of their empowerment and agency.

Both films have shown how once the women take the first step towards decision making autonomy, the process of their liberation begins. In *Daman Durga*, who could not take decisions regarding her own life, becomes empowered when she decides that she would not let her daughter suffer the same fate and would ensure that her daughter gets the right to make the decisions related to her life. She says to her daughter, "*It will not happen as long as I am alive. You will have all the rights to choose your life partner. You have to complete your education. You have to reach your goal. You have to achieve something and prove yourself*". In *Mrityudand* too, Ketki chooses the way she would lead her life in the face of great resistance as she feels that she can recognize what is right and what is wrong for her. In a scene when she is taking her sister-in-law away from their house for recuperation after an illness, she is asked by a woman "*Why are you leaving your husband in this condition? Don't you need to look after him and his needs?*" She answers "*It will be just for a couple of days. The cook and the maid can take care of the men folk*". This is a small step towards exerting her power of decision making. Also, when Chandravati realizes that she is pregnant with the child of her lover, she says to her friend that "*I've broken all the rules. I have done it. I decided to. It is the first time I have used my will. How long does one follow the rules? And what rules are these that force us to tolerate endlessly? How much? And for whose sake? I don't care about the consequences.*"

5.3. Empowerment and Rebellion

Empowerment contains within it, the word power. So naturally it follows that empowerment is about power and about changing the balance of power. As far as the women's empowerment is concerned, it is about gaining control over one's life which includes many dimensions such as economic, social and political (Bheemarasetty,, 2012). Comprehensively, women's empowerment is a state of being that reflects a certain level of critical consciousness about external realities and an awareness about their internal thought construction and belief systems that affect their well-being in terms of gender justice and social justice, as well as the determination to use their physical, intellectual emotional and spiritual resources to protect their lives and sustain values that guarantee gender equity at personal, social, economic, political and institutional level.

Recognizing women's rights and believing their ability are essential for women's empowerment and development. Once women realize their own capabilities and potentials it strengthens their self image and fosters them with confidence to take action in life. Empowerment of women is the fundamental to the basics of human rights where women have neither to beg for power nor search for power hierarchy to exercise power against others. On the contrary they demand to be accepted as human first of all.

Indian society has been marked by male chauvinism but now the society has started to realize women's importance and is slowly learning to accept women's empowerment and women as active agents, participating in and guiding their own development. Signs of this can be seen in cinematic narratives also.

In *Daman*, the director has emphasized women's empowerment and improvement of women's status with help of education. In a sequence the police officer expresses his perception about women's empowerment and tells Durga that "*Be aware. Move ahead in life. Get out of this lonely existence. You can fight against the atrocities of men. You can demand for safe guarding women's rights and fight for protecting their self-respect. Only the laws of the country will not be able to protect you. You will find yourself strong and well equipped only with a weapon like education. This will cause social awareness among women*". She replies that "*That is why I will complete Deepa's (her daughter's) education. She will have every right to live life. I will not create any obstacles in her life. Neither will I force her into marriage. She should be economically independent so that no man can treat with her the way my husband did with me*".

In *Mrityudand* also we can observe the heroine Ketki, an educated woman, is a very strong person. After her husband started to abuse her, he wants to touch her. But she tells him that "*Don't touch me. There is a limit to one's tolerance. Do you think you could drag me into bed, after just saying sorry? Would that set everything right? What do you think women are? Mere toys? Everything is finished; I've fallen in my own esteem. Hitting me is not a small thing. Does this not matter much to you? Do I have no identity of my own? Do I not matter at all*"? When her husband tells her "*What about my needs? You remember your limits woman*", she replies "*You can't define limits with violence. You are my husband, not God*". Clearly Ketki comes across as a strong person who has the strength to defy her husband although they live in a highly patriarchal system.

In another sequence when Kanti the maid tells Ketki about her apprehensions regarding the contractor to whom her husband owes money and who is asking for sexual favors in return, Ketki says to her *"He can't force you to repay. And he can't burn your house. It's just that you don't know what the law says. You mustn't be afraid if he comes calling again. Don't think you are weak just because you are a woman"*. Through this statement she offers hope to all women who feel helpless in the face of patriarchy by making them aware of their rights.

Similarly, the idea of women rebelling against the man-made norms is also presented in both films. With regards to women's agency and rebellion, Durga in *Daman* rebels against the misbehavior of her husband and leaves him taking her daughter with her whom she is planning to marry off to an old man. And when he becomes a nuisance in their life and she feels her daughter's life is threatened by him, she finally becomes Mother Durga, the Hindu goddess signifying female dynamism, who is the destroyer and slayer of demons, and kills her husband rebelling against the image of the dutiful wife who tolerates everything her husband does.

It is interesting to mention that *Durga's* daughter is quite unlike her mother. She clearly expresses her feeling of hatred towards her father for causing her mother's sufferings. She tells her boyfriend, *"I am not a devoted and submissive wife. My father has returned to make life hell for me and my mom. Protecting women, love, marriage is that all you men can think about. I don't want to be dependent on you or any other man. What made you think that I will remain just a wife and go through all the agony my mother has gone through all her life"*. She, too, rebels against the stereotype of the 'good girl' that she is expected to be.

In *Mrityudand* too, the presentation of women's empowerment and rebellion is done through various scenes. In one such sequence, a poor woman in village stands up to her boss when he treats her in badly. The man says to her that *"You talk to me in this way in front of the whole village. What do you think you can do? A whore"*. She replies that *"If I am the whore you are my pimp. I'll say it. A hundred times over! I spit on you."* It is an important moment as an ordinary women stands up to the might of a powerful man.

In another sequence some women under the leadership of Ketki go to Tripat Singh's place to protect a poor woman. The man says to her that *"Enjoy the display of my power. Welcome to the show"*. She asserts that *"I can see Contractor Tripat Singh. But I am amazed. Why aren't all these people who seem to be enjoying your circus, not clapping? May be your show isn't over yet. Maybe this poor woman hasn't been abused enough. What are you waiting for? Go ahead. Rip her clothes off. Show the people the power of your brute force. Then they will clap for you. They will cheer you all the way. And they will remember this circus for a long time to come. I'll leave of course. But not without my sister. Stop me if you can. Maul me if you will. Perhaps the villagers will enjoy your circus even more."* This impressive scene reveals that how women can come together and break men's domination and rebel against patriarchy.

Then there is Chandravati, the otherwise meek and traditional wife of Ketki's brother-in-law who rebels against the social norms by bearing a low caste man's child because her husband neglects her. On learning about this, the husband tries to hit her and she tells him in this scene, *"Come on. Try and kill me. Show me your strength. Even if it be like this, let me for once, feel the pleasure of fulfillment. What a hypocrite you are. I was dead for all you cared. Why have*

you come back now? To assert your authority? To exhibit your might? Did you think you can hurt me just because I am a woman? You thought you could break me. I too am full of life. I want to live". It is worth noting that the director of *Mrityudand* has emphasized women's agency which has been portrayed in many sequences as mentioned above. There is an impressive statement in end of the movie about women's empowerment. Ketki tells the audience that *"Do not think I am weak. Do not deprive me of my dignity. I am not powerless. I have done my duty as a woman. I shall bear my responsibility as a mother. With all my love I shall nourish my child. And I shall tell my child never do an injustice to the weak. And never ever succumb to injustice."* Thus, as the above discussion on the films *Daman* and *Mrityudand* has made it clear cinema can be an important medium for the depiction of both the structural dimensions of a society, as also the agency phenomenon.

6. Comparative Analysis

Daman tells us the story of *Durga* who is shown to endure immense ill-treatment – physical and emotional – by her oppressive husband. She chooses to leave him in order to save her daughter from being ruined by an early marriage and on being pursued by her husband who now threatens the life and freedom of her daughter, she kills him. The second film *Mrityudand* portrays three women's story. There is *Ketki* who lives in a traditional family and tries to stand up to the patriarchal system. There is *Chandravati* who is the epitome of the quietly suffering woman who tolerates injustice mutely. And then there is *Kanti*, an impoverished woman who is exploited by men since she bears the double cross of not only being a woman but also being poor.

It is significant to note that in both films, women who have led unhappy lives search for liberation from societies ruled by men. They suffer from the injustices heaped on them by the patriarchal system but choose not to be viewed as victims. Instead, they all strive to change their dependent and subordinated positions. They go through a lot of hardship in their lives but decide to rebel against the society by making efforts to impose their own will and demands on their relations with men, both in the private and public spheres. They are presented as changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands. Let us now discuss the commonalities and differences in the films in terms of the sub-themes which are related to women's agency within the two selected Indian films.

6.1. Education

Education as a source of women's empowerment is a significant subject which has been stressed by Indian filmmakers. In many films it has been depicted that educated women are more aware of their needs and rights and that it is more likely that an educated woman would try to challenge the patriarchal rules which hinder her development. In the Indian film *Daman*, once again the protagonist *Durga* is depicted as a woman who is not educated and leads a miserable life having to tolerate ill-treatment by her husband and his family. In a poignant scene she is shown to rue her being uneducated and displays her desire for educating her daughter so that she can be spared of the kind of existence that *Durga* herself has led. Finally, although the film *Mrityudand* does not focus directly on the subject of women's

education, however, it is shown that in a village full of traditional inhabitants, it is an educated woman Ketki who first stands up to the injustices inherent in patriarchy and then motivates other women to rebel against the exploitation and domination of men. Thus, there is a similarity between both films which extol the virtues of education, directly or indirectly. However, it is important to take note of the fact that of the both films, it is the one directed by women which focus more clearly on this subject whereas in the male directed film, the issue is touched upon indirectly only.

6.2. Decision Making and Empowerment

One of the main indicators of agency is decision making power. It is a well-known fact that patriarchy is characterized by men making all the decisions whereas women stand at the sidelines merely conforming to the norms and decisions made by men. In this sense the capacity to be able to take independent decisions would indicate empowerment for them. In the films under study it becomes relevant to see whether the central female characters individually take any decisions or do they also portray the traditional roles of women following their men's directions. In *Daman* the protagonist takes the decision to leave her home to bring to an end her misery on account of the abuse she suffers at her husband's hand. *Mrityudand* shows Ketki as a woman who first takes the decision to defy the males in her household and the village and then to lead the other women towards emancipation from domination system. The other character Chandravati, an otherwise traditional woman decides to break the social norms, leave her home and have an affair with a low caste man. Thus in both films women become sensitized to their power and try to challenge the existing structure by taking some bold decisions.

6.3. Rebellion

It is interesting to mention that most of women characters in the two selected films have a touch of rebellion in their personality. These are a woman who attempt to assert their individuality through their actions, sometimes not even thinking about the consequences of this actions. The protagonist Durga in *Daman* rebels against her husband's violence and finally kills him, thereby breaking away from the expected image of a submissive woman. Notably in *Mrityudand*, rebellion is emphasized by showing all women coming together and rebelling against the patriarchal system assertively. In the Indian films *Daman* and *Mrityudand*, however, we see greater evidence of women's agency to rebel against the social norms and patriarchal ideology and their capacity to change the system.

7. Conclusion

Cinema is a social phenomenon. It is a reflection of the society. Films, can thus, be examined as a cultural product and as a social practice. Films reflect society's main values, ideas and beliefs. The cinematic studies in the field of sociology usually study sociological themes such as social structure, hegemony, patriarchy, subordination, marginality, with special attention to the issue of effects of caste, social class, religion, tradition and ethnicity in the analysis of representations in films. Gender too, is an important aspect of the cinematic narratives. Gender is culturally constructed in social interaction and social structure in the course of cinema which depicts and captures the real lives of people in the social and cultural spheres.

In fact, the theme of cinema as a reinforcer of traditional structure or as a tool of social transformation is one of the integral debates in the sociological analysis of films. Our study too is a modest effort in this regard. In this study we have discussed the linkage of gender and media with specific focus on women's depiction on screen. The general purpose of this study was to investigate the interrelation of gender, women and cinema in the context of Indian films. The mode of study that we made use of was qualitative research method which took the form of narrative method for analyzing the selected films. These films have focused on similar issues related to gender relations. Both films belong to the category of art cinema. The films show women characters both as oppressed beings and also as empowered individuals. By examining the representation of women in Indian cinema, with the help of film criticism theory and literature on agency, we have tried to unearth the importance of emerging women's cinema. We focused on the agency aspect of women in challenging the traditional social norms. In the Indian film *Daman*, Durga turns into a murderer. In *Mrityudand*, the act of all women in the village coming together and attacking the errant males is seen as an empowering feat. Which leads to the question that can this highly emotional and exciting scene in the cinematic and dramatic context be replicated in real life? If yes, what would be its further consequences?

It is possible that the political and social conditions in India might make it somewhat difficult for the directors to move away from the typical treatments of their respective films, which may be especially true in the case of women directors. However, the end result remains the same. Even if to some extent agency is depicted in the portrayals of all female characters, yet, it appears that in all cases patriarchy, signifying structure wins. In the two studied films in this paper, we could see the typical male and female stereotypes and the portrayal of the patriarchal structure dominating not only the life of the women characters but also the narrative of the film. This makes it clear that in film circles all over the world it is the male gaze that rules the cinematic narratives. What can be further added to this is that this male gaze is not limited to the male directors but is very much a part of the women directors' work as well. The explanation is simple. Women directors, despite their desire to produce works that deal with women's issues, are themselves unable to transcend the cultural value structure that pervades the society in which they have been raised and in which they live.

In conclusion, we would like to re-iterate that the application of agency debate in this study was done with the aim of extending film analysis, especially the study of women's portrayal, from the usual psychoanalytical and semiotic approaches to a more sociological examination. In cinematic terms it means that since the image of women in cinematic representations reflects the realities of women's lives, then by showing empowerment and agency of women on screen, perception of society may be changed and people can be made have a better understanding of women's social and cultural issues. Since so much of discrimination becomes internalized as cultural values, cultural action and educational interventions are imperative to break down existing gender stereotypes fostered by patriarchy, both in films and in real life.

References

- Acharya D. R., Bell J.S., Simkhada P., Van Teijlingen E.R., and Regmi P.R. (2010). Women's Autonomy in Household Decision-Making: A Demographic Study in Nepal. *Reproductive Health*, 7:15. doi:10.1186/1742-4755-7-15.
- Beasley, C. (2005). *Gender and Sexuality*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bheemarasetty, P. D. (2012). Women Empowerment: A Challenge. *Social Science Research Network*, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1997087>
- Butalia, U. (1984). Women in Indian Cinema. *Feminist Review*, (17), 108-110.
- Chatterji, S. A. (1998). *Subject Cinema, Object Women*. Kolkata: Parumita Publications.
- Datta, S. (2000). Globalization and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema. *Social Scientist*. 28(3/4): 71-82.
- Dines, G. and Humez, J.M. (2003). *Gender, Race and Class in Media*. London: Sage Publications.
- Gokulsing K. M., and Dissanayake W. (1998). *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*. London: Trentham Books Limited.
- Jain J., and Rai S. (2002). *Films and Feminism*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Jackson S., and Jacjje J. (1998). *Contemporary Feminist Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Jackson S. and Scott S. (2002). *Gender: A Sociological Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Kandiyoti D. (1996). *Gendering the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Khan, A. (2004). Daman: Review. [Online] available at: <http://www.rewaj.com/entertainment/daman.html>.
- Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of Gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mayne, J. (1981). The woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism. *New German Critique*, (23): 27-43
- Ritzer, G. (2005). *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- Shohat, E. (1990). Gender in Hollywood's Orient. *Middle East Report*. No. 162

Uberoi, P. (1990). Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 25(17): WS41-WS48.

IJHCS