

A Case Study on Understanding the Representation of Gendered Subaltern Perspective in Rudaali Movie

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Abstract

The research study examines to understand the background of the Rudaali community and analyse the subaltern through the movie *Rudaali* (1993). The research helped to find out the intensity of oppressed against poverty, humiliation and wrecked by an exploitative patriarchal caste-based social system in the film. This movie was adopted from Mahaswetha Devi 'Rudali short story'. The film is set against the physical and cultural backdrop of Rajasthan. The film revolves around the life of Sanichari, a woman in rural Rajasthan. This study used Post Colonial Theory (Subaltern Studies) to explore caste, class and gender perspectives in the film. The qualitative approach employed to analyze the data using narrative analysis and thematic analysis.

Keywords - Rudaali, Cinema, Subaltern, Qualitative, Gender, Community, Post Colonial Theory

Introduction

Film is one of the most important means of communicating with a wider audience. Cinema plays a fundamental role in transmitting the message to its viewers through audio-visual medium. Movies are cultural artefacts created by specific cultures; they reflect those cultures and, in turn, affect them. The film is considered to be an important art form, a source of popular entertainment, and a powerful medium for educating -or indoctrinating citizens.

As Eco points out that the 'Film, as a text, can say more than one supposes, they can always say something new, precisely because signs are the starting point of a process of interpretation which leads to an infinite series of progressive consequences'. 'Texts are more or less open to multiple interpretations. (Eco, Umberto 1981).

Indian cinema is one of the most flourishing film industries; it began in 1913, when the father of Indian cinema Dada Saheb Phalke released the first-ever full-length feature film 'Raja Harishchandra'. Today, Indian cinema is not restricted only to the Indian audience, but also appreciated and enjoyed by the international audience. However, Indian cinema has played a vital role in the social changes through films. The earlier stages of Indian movies were focused on myths and epics concepts. In the 1950's - 1960's period can be considered as the golden era of Indian cinema industry. At the time, Indian film was focused on our rich culture, socio-political issues, customs, norms, and ethics.

Fiske and Hartley (1978) have argued that of all the popular means of mass media, movies have the greatest mass appeal and acceptance. Talking of movies particularly has become a powerful medium to communicate with the public.

Women and Cinema

Cinema plays an essential role in shaping views about gender roles and gender identities within the Indian context where women are viewed as playing subordinate roles to men (Ram 2002). The earlier women character were shown in Indian films was depicted as loving, caring, submissive, self scarifying, dependent on men, or as objects of male attention.

The portrayal of women in the majority of Bollywood films is highly stereotypical. Subsequently, many claim that the objectification of women in Bollywood films contributes to the increasing sexual violence against women in India, by constructing gender roles and misrepresenting gender relations. These claims can be backed by the so-called item songs, or item numbers, in Bollywood films. An increasing number of films featured item songs, a song and dance number, featuring scantily clad actresses, dancing explicitly to indecent lyrics.

Women were once an important role in Indian films; women held a lot of accountability on their shoulders to sell the films in the market. Women were given an equal role in the films along with the male actors. Now Indian films have started portraying lead female protagonist in strong roles than male lead protagonist. There are numerous women-centric movies released in India and various renowned female directors who have worked on the women related issues include Deepa Metha, Meera Nair, Aparna Sen and Kalpana Lajmi. The notable women centric issues Indian movies are; Mother India(1957), Aval Oru Thodarkathai(1974), Aval Appadithaan(1978), Rudaali(1993), Priyanka(1994), Bandit Queen(1994), Magalirmattum(1994) Mrityudand(1997) and Lajja(2001) etc.,

Kalpana Lajmi

Kalpana Lajmi (1954 - 2018) was a notable female Indian film director, screenwriter and producer. She is one of the realistic and independent filmmakers in Bollywood industry. Kalpana Lajmi most of the films were focused on feminism related issues. Kalpana Lajmi directed several movies were recognized and received national awards. Kalpana Lajmi movies are *D.G. Movie Pioneer* (1978), *A work study in tea plucking* (1979), *Along the Brahmaputra* (1981), *Ek Pal* (1986), *Lohit Kinare* (1988), *Rudaali* (1993), *Darmiyaan: in between* (1997), *Daman: A victim of marital violence* (2001), *Kyon?* (2003) and *Chingaari* (2006).

Rudaali (1993)

Rudaali (roo-dah-lee) movie is a Hindi language film (Bollywood film) directed by Kalpana Lajmi released in 1993. The word “*Rudaali*” stands for the professional mourners. Rajasthan state, when a rich man dies, the family members hire female weepers to exhibit grief. This kind of practice is popular in this region and the women mourners wear black dress and they cry with unbound hair. Tears are turned into commodities and the elite class people consider this custom as the social status to enhance the prestige. The *Rudaali* movie was an Indian foreign language entry film for 66th Academy Awards. The director of the movie Kalpana Lajmi who herself is highly inspired and motivated by short stories and novels. *Rudaali* movie story is an adaptation of a short story written by eminent Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi. The Mahasweta Devi was a well-known fiction writer and socio-political activist in India. Mahasweta Devi speaks about the serious problem of India and suppressed life of women in independent India.

I strongly believe that Rudaali is a women's text. I believe that the Indian woman, whether it's Sanichari or someone from the middle or upper class, is highly exploited in our society. Somehow, in Rudaali, I see Sanichari protesting against society on the whole (Ganguly 1993 and Katya, 2010).

Methodology

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative research is a form of social action that stresses on the way people interpret, and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore the social or human problem (Creswell, 1994). Qualitative research focuses on words rather than numbers, this type of research observes the world in its natural setting, interpreting situations to understand the meanings that people make from day to day life (Walia, 2015). Based on the above, the researcher chosen qualitative research to obtain accurate explanation to analyze and present what have been found in the movie. The present study used narrative analysis, thematic analysis and character analysis of ‘Rudaali movie’.

Sample

This study film was chosen as the primary source of data collection due to inaccessibility of observing and interviewing the *Rudaali* community people. The present study core of the analysis focuses on how marginalised people represented in *Rudaali* movie, by the way of analyzing the characters, identifying the themes and narrative of the film.

Subalternity Represented

The term ‘subaltern’ was coined by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, writer and communist politician. According to his theory, subaltern means the people of ‘inferior rank’, to refer to those working-class people who are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied

access to hegemonic power. The subaltern becomes defined in descriptive terms, according to a particular marginalized subject position in any given cultural or social context (Loui, 2012). The perspective of the film *Rudaali* Shanichari and her community peoples are the original subalterns. They are unemployed both male and female, because of a lack of education that they cannot even afford in their dreams. They have to work as slaves in the hukum's fields, quarry, as servants in haveli, as prostitutes and also as Rudaalis after death. They are treated like slaves, because they are from lower castes and vulnerable persons. Women belonging to lower castes are hired to mourn the death of a person belonging to the upper section of society. Rudaalis come over, cry their heart out, beat their chest and show grief inconsolably.

Thematic analysis

Thematic Analysis is a primary methodology in qualitative research. Thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows an individual to adapt a "wide variety of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people, events, situations, and organizations." (Boyatzis, 1998).

The researcher selected the thematic analysis for this study to analyze the marginalization, subaltern, social -political ramification of the film *Rudaali*. The following scenes breakdown in the film and patterns are identified using data gathered from the *Rudaali* film. A list of three different major categories of themes have been identified which are as follows:

- Women Oppression
- Caste, Class and Custom
- Myths and Beliefs

Women Oppression

Women's oppression has been a subject for centuries; Women all over the world are oppressed because of religion, politics, or even their male partners. Women's representations in the media are not just economically and politically oppressed, but they are also symbolically oppressed (Kuhn, 1982). This theme signifies how women's' treated by elite group of people in the film *Rudaali*.

The women oppression was depicted in *Rudaali* film, Shanichari who wins her an alcoholic Ganju at gambling in Dongri village. When Shanichari was a young woman and looks beautiful. At that time, the people decided to marry the alcoholic Ganju without her consent. This scene viewpoint understood that, a woman who belongs to lower caste treated as object. Another scene in the film the oppression was shown; Shanichari was cursed just because of her name and also cursed saying raand (a prostitute). We could also see women bowing their heads in front of the Malik Mahajans just in a way of respect. But, it was seen as a practice since years where we found women in that state before men.

Ramjilal a customer, where Shanichari and Mungri were selling their carpets in the market at that time Pandit and the shopkeeper just came and pass the vulgar comments on the women in the open market. As well, they called whore for them. Pandit and the shopkeeper were passing comments looking at mungri (a whore) standing in the trade market. Later, they came to know that mungri was shanichari's daughter in law, they started cursing them saying about brothel and these women's must be thrown out of the village. In addition, said that to find similar kind of people (brothel) has been isolated them away from the village. They never saw their impurity inside them, just because they are the women of the low-caste they are treated very outrageous.

A prostitute wept Nathuni singh's funeral the elite men took her away from the mourning place, the prostitute told that she can weep louder than Bhikni but the elite men denied her to mourn in Nathuni singh's funeral.

In this film depicted that *Rudaali* community people the source of income was earned by death mourning and working as a bonded labour in village landlords. The survival was the most challenging problem for *Rudaali* people in Rajasthan. The Zamindar and pandit ruined the *Rudaali* community people normal social life.

Caste, Class and Custom

This theme has been identified the representation of the caste, class and custom in their lives; in particularly describe how the *Rudaali* community treated persons in Rajasthan. The social status of a person has determined by their caste, the women from poverty and lower caste are obliged to be *Rudaali*. It is known that hiring a *Rudaali* to mourn is a socio-cultural custom practiced by the elite members of the villages of Rajasthan. Hiring a *Rudaali* is a status symbol and augments family pride. Rudaalis verge as complicated model of amusement for the upper classes, the Shanichari's psychological aspect of grief is dominated by the elite class in the modes of religion and rituals.

In *Rudaali* the caste discrimination was shown in the scene; Thakur's haveli when Shanichari was called by chote hukum to take care of his wife. Moti(maid) accompanied Shanichari, where looked at the water tap, it was opened and a lot of water was flowing down in the house. Moti (maid) told shanichari, she has never seen the water flow in her life. In addition, most of the elite class people like Thakur in the village have been used a lot of water for daily use. Unfavourably, the people of the *Rudaali* community were daily walking several kilometers through the desert to get a pot of water for their daily use. In addition, the people of the *Rudaali* community lived with mud huts and pots in their house. They were confronted with many struggles and inhumane treatment of men of the upper class in the village. Although, people in the *Rudaali* community people treated as bonded labour to work the hukum field in a few years or life time. The people of the elite group have been formed certain rules in the area, they do not allow to cremate people of lower caste. .

Myths and Beliefs

The theme is identified as a fundamental Hindu religion philosophy and myths in *Rudaali* movie. The professional mourners wear only black colour the favourite colour of Yama, the God of death and *Rudaali*'s mourns after the death not before that because it will be a bad sign.

When shanichari was young and met Lakshman singh in the desert for the first time, he fell in love with her and he wanted to treat her equally as their community. Shanichari was asked to look into his eyes and speak, where she initially refused to say that this act could bring him misfortune.

When she was asked to serve him with water, she had in her pot to satisfy his thirst; she again gave the lame myth that he would become impure after drinking water from her pot because she was a woman of low caste.

There is such a belief that the not offering of Pandit food and money during the last rites of lower caste people like Shanichari's family is a sin and they get cursed to be in hell after their deaths. While it's the karma's result to reach heaven or hell after the death according to the Hindu law. Each village pandit has his own philosophies of Hinduism and finds his way of living out of it.

The vulture revolving in the sky is a sign of someone's death in the deserted regions. It is a truth and also a person living in the deserted area believes and finds any death in the village on this basis.

The offering of cow (gowdaan) can show the path of heaven to the people on the death bed, it's a blind belief that people follow to protect themselves from hell. Providing food to five or seven pandits can gather blessings that might be a symbol to reach heaven. The opening scene of the movie shows such blind belief when hukum was ailing and want to do all the offerings to reduce his pain while dying.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis method that includes the analysis of the characteristics of the narrative text, and recently of the meaning of inter-human relations in social, historical, and cultural contexts (Hoshmand, 2005; Felton & Stickley, 2018). In narrative research data are collected by observations, diaries, letters, interviews, artifacts, and photographs (Lenberg et al., 2017).

Narrative research is a term that subsumes a group of approaches that in turn rely on the written or spoken words or visual representation of individuals. These approaches typically focus on the lives of individuals as told through their own stories. The emphasis in such approaches is on the story, typically both what and how is narrated. Narrative methods can be considered “real world measures” that are appropriate when “real life problems” are investigated.

The film *Rudaali* is set in Barna, a remote village in Rajasthan, India. The god of bad fortune is known to be Shani; thereby the protagonist of the movie was named as Shanichari, because throughout her life she experienced bad fortunes. Sanichari starts leading a solitary life when a *rudaali*, professional mourner, enters her life. *Rudaali* are women of a low caste in Northern India (particularly in the state of Rajasthan) who perform mourning dances and songs at the funerals of higher caste men (Hurlstone, 2011). The movie starts with Ram Avtar, the village's zamindar (landlord) realizing his impending death and the truth that none of his relatives would weep for him. He asked the notorious *Rudaali* (professional weeper) called Bhikni to weep for him once he dies. She eventually stays with Shanichari who resides away from the Thakur's palace. As they both begin to bond, Shanichari tells the story of her life and the reason behind her name. Shanichari has been blamed for all the misfortunes that have occurred in the village since her father's death until her mother Peewli's fled to join a theatre troupe. Shanichari married Ganju at the young age; Shanichari gave birth to a boy named Budhwa. Ganju was an alcoholic person and died because of food poisoning. Shanichari only family support was Budhwa, her loving son and he enjoys wandering aimlessly like Peewli.

While, Thakur's son Lakshman Singh falls her and he gave a work to Shanichari to take care of his pregnant wife. Lakshman Singh asks Shanichari to leave her family and stay in the palace. But Shanichari denied. Lakshman teaches Shanichari to empower herself and to look into his eyes and speak. At night, the Thakur's family gave some land to Shanichari and asked to stay away from the palace. The child Budhwa was grown up and married a young prostitute named Mungri and carries Budhwa child. Mungri and Sanichari sell their handmade carpets in the market where the Pandits comment horribly about them. There was no kind of relationship between Shanichari, Budhwa and Mungri. One day, in an attack of rage, Mungri aborts the baby. Budhwa was devastated by the event and left her mother alone. At that time, it was revealed that Shanichari had never shed a tear throughout her life -long struggles. Bhikni after hearing her story began to cry, Shanichari then told her to keep the tears for her funeral since she had nobody behind her. Shanichari asked Bhikni how could manage to cry for continuously 3 days; Bhikni replied that, brought a mixture of kajal with which it helps her to bring out the tears. Bhikni applied that to Shanichari but there were no tears out of her eyes. Bhikni asked Shanichari to cry out loud, all your tears have dried it will kill you from inside miseries. As the story comes to an end Sanicahri as well as the audience learns that Bhikni was indeed the mother who had abandoned her as a child. This piece of information toils as the trigger to burst Sanichari's pent up emotions. She cries for the first time in her life and becomes a *rudaali*.

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