

From Confinement to Liberation: Ecofeminist Study on *Manikarnika* with Reference to 21st Century Indian Cinema

AMIT KUMAR

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English
Modern European and Other Foreign Languages
Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University
Srinagar (Uttarakhand) (A Central University)

Abstract

First two decades of the twenty first century Indian cinema showcases the similar traditional foundations of constructivism and misrepresentation of woman and nature on screen either as static or a passive object. Woman has been confined to perform roles like beloved, sister, mother or a victim in the hands of evil characters and consequentially been stagnant. Now, a slight paradigm shift in the representation of woman is observed and in this regard *Manikarnika* (2019) sets a milestone in Bollywood similar as *Wonder Woman* (2017) in Hollywood. This study is qualitative in nature which intends to introspect the role of woman and nature in *Manikarnika* through the lens of Ecofeminism particularly devaluation being a methodological tool. The affinity between woman and nature imposed by patriarchal institutions and their constructive representation in Indian cinema prevails incessantly and therefore, it is pertinent to demonstrate the extent of social as well as ecological injustice in our surroundings. This research article aims to strengthen and values the efforts of a female actor in today's Indian cinema towards liberation of woman and ecology in particular and life of each organism or life support system in general for the survival of entire humanity.

Keywords: cinema, constructivism, manikarnika, ecofeminism, devaluation.

Introduction

This section aims to illustrate a brief account of the representation of woman in the first two decades of twenty first century Hindi films in order to understand the milieu of the film genre in twenty first century. The following questions form the basis of this research i.e. how the attributes of woman and nature are shown alike in cinema? How devaluation of woman and nature emphasised in cinema? Research highlights the concept of devaluation as per Ecofeminists Carolyn Merchant and Karen Warren, a concept on which basis the film *Manikarnika* is going to be evaluated in this research so that the role of woman from a fixed role to liberated one can be investigated.

Since the inception of Indian cinema, woman and nature, together remains a source of objectification and beautification in order to attract the audience or to enhance the zest for romance on big screen. ". . . The position that the woman occupies in Hindi cinema defines a pan- Indian

sensibility where free market liberalism battles reactionary ultra-nationalist forces for the bodies of women or in effect for their labor value aestheticised through the institution of the family (Kona)". Both woman and nature have been represented as meek, mild, modest, submissive or passive. Nature often represented as a good companion of woman either to create an enchanting atmosphere with its scenic beauty in the background or a soul healing energy at the time of distress. First two decades of twenty first century shows women and nature together as an object of enchantment to the eyes of the audience either through item songs which objectifies the body of a woman or nature so that both can be subdued or exploited. Woman, since a long time ago used to be stagnant object while performing the selective domestic roles and rarely performs the role of a protagonist in the film. Both nature and woman are shown as a supportive segment (beautification or objectification) to carry forward the plot of a film. Various aspects of nature are used to add romantic

flavor to a scene where female actor sings or dances. There are songs where the affinity of woman and nature is stressed which depicts both as a beautiful object to be desired like *Mere hath me tera hath ho* where Amit Khan in this song holds Kajol in arms and behind the scene there is a spectacular colorful beauty of trees and leaves falling down. Katrina Kaif and pyramids are equally romanticized in the song *Teri ore*. Waterfall, lush green astonishing mountains echoes the beauty of Kajol in song *Gerua*. Amy Jackson is called by her lover to hug him in the beautiful mountains in the song, *aajamahiaajamahiaasoneya* and *Aaj se teri sari galiyanmeri ho gyiis* a song where hero emphasise that everything belongs to his beloved is his and he plucks flowers from tree to beautify her.

A female actor, over the years, and consequentially in first two decades of the twenty first century has shown as a supportive segment in a film. For instance, Kareena Kapoor in *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* is present in the film just to add romantic flavor in the film and her role is not seen even as a contributing factor to the major sequences of the film. Aishwarya Rai in *Guru* has played the role of a beloved and obedient wife. Gracy Singh in *Munna Bhai MBBS* is a beloved and merely looks a tiny spec if compared to the role of Sanjay Dutt. Amy Jackson in *Robot 2.0* is adding glamor to the film and is rarely seen in action as compared to Akshay Kumar and Rajnikath. Kiara Advani in *Kabir Singh* is a victim of a sycophant lover. Woman is still seen as an object to be portrayed as a beloved where she is to be victimized in order to prove heroism of the protagonist such as Anuksha Shetty playing Devsena in *Bahubali*, Deepika Padukone as Padmavati in *Padmavat*, Nargis Fakhria as a symbol of sensual love in *Rockstar*, Asin as victimized beloved in *Ghajinor* Malika Sherawat and Sunny Leone as a symbol of sex in *Murder* and *Jism2*, In all movies mentioned above, woman acts passively and the entire action of the film revolves around hero who actually dominates most of the scenes and situations of the film and consequentially justifies his valor and heroism. Woman is shown as a beloved, wife, item girl, sex object, or simply an oppressed creature for which hero of the film take vengeance to liberate her from the clutches of villain. In a study, it is found that,

. . . Over the years the method of expression, of nature and sexuality, has changed to a considerable extent. The aesthetic sense of the filmmakers have widened in order to serve the visual appetite of the viewers . . . Through explicit portrayal of sexuality and body shots, women become the victim of gaze and are objectified for inducing scopophilic pleasure which can be considered as a chief attraction that drags audience to the theatres. Therefore the role of both nature and woman has been diminished as a mere commodity, tactfully used for the marketing of the movies . . . (Georgy 71)

Samien Kidwai in her thesis writes that, 'in order to present the modernity among women, Indian filmmakers have parachuted on an idea that the display of dancing girls in 'minimum' clothes is real expression of freedom (11-12)'. In this study, researcher also stressed on the slight shift in the role of woman,

Actresses like Vidya Balan (*Paa*, *Dirty Picture*, *Kahani*, *Ishqiya*) and Konkona Sen Sharma (*Page 3*, *Life in a Metro*, *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*) have led this change of direction, who have appeared in strong and independent roles which for the time being shifted the camera's focus from the women's body to her identity as an individual. (12)

In recent times, there are various songs filmed in movies where a woman is represented as a source of sexual gratification viz., *Bheeghon there*, *Munnibadnamhui darling tereliye*, *Ye jism ha to kyayehroohkalibashai*, *Lailateri le legi*, *Baby dol me sone di*, *Aashiqbanayaapne (new)*, *jaanave* etc.' The territory, nature and woman's body become play-things in the hands of patriarchal politicians' (Wasima 319). Woman is represented in low costumes, making sensual moves while camera focus is on female breast, lips, neck, waist or thighs. Wasim reiterates that, "Territory and woman become similar. Land is controlled, mastered, divided, cultivated like a female body and her womb is tilled like a virgin land . . . (322) She finds in her study that, 'these immolated women are either treated simply as lumps of masses or animals which are consumable to assuage the fleshly hunger' (322). She also emphasized that the destruction of people, land or the soil leads to the tithing of status quo of society and the idea of forming nations on

religious or ethnic grounds leads society towards nothing but a parochial nationalism.(324)

Indeed some efforts have been made in twenty first century which intends to project woman and feminine issues keeping woman as protagonist but these films have not met with deserving respect and love from the audience or has proven successful on Box Office. *Mardani, Queen, Naam Shabana, Akira, Jazba, Mary Kom, Chhapaak, Thappad*, are few examples which has entered footsteps in showcasing female as protagonist but none of them were acknowledged by the audience as a malecentric film but a transition has undoubtedly been noticed in Bollywood with these films. Bollywood from time to time tries to make films based solely on woman but it is *Manikarnika* that has set milestone in Hindi film industry so far as the role of woman in cinema is concerned.

Devaluation

Devaluation, according to eco feminism, with 'women as Other and men as godlike and inherently superior' is a patriarchal construction (Merchant 4). It is 'a critique of male domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male gender bias about women and nature. It not only recognizes the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, and ethnic considerations, it centralizes those voices . . . (7)'. It aims to trace out the ideology that strengthens the devaluation of a subject. Eco feminism phasised that the exploitation of woman as well as nature comes from a same source i.e. patriarchy. According to Karen Warren, "nature" (referring to nonhuman animals, plants, and ecosystems) is included among those Others Who/that have been unjustifiably exploited and dominated. "Nature is a feminist issue" might well be called the slogan of eco feminism (Warren 1)". Warren also asserts that the increase in the males' attitude of dominance leads towards the devaluation of 'female culture and power' and the connection between women and nature, and gradually the devaluation of both. (Warren 66)

Discussion

This section explores how Mani karnika, the queen of Jhansi, devalued under the rule of East India Company

and how Jhansi, its people as well as animals became a source of commodity for the company. How Mani karnika as a character liberates form patriarchal standards of feminization and Kangana Ranauts female actor frees herfrom traditional roles of domestic life. *Mani karnika*, Kangana Ranaut starrer film is highly iconic in Hindi film industry which has become the first ever film having female as protagonist and enters 100 crore club at Box office. This film is based on the valor of Rani Lakshmi Bai who is a source of inspiration for generations in India. She has fought bravely with Britishers in order to save the honor of her land and her own. Kangana Ranaut with her magnificent acting skills has proven that a woman is proficient enough to play the role of a leading actor in a film, which can be empowering as well as inspirational for audience and a woman can bea successful actor commercially at The Box Office. For this reason, she is also entitled as *The Queen of Bollywood*.

The exploitation of land as well as people of Jhansi was the sole interest of British colonialism which is shown in the film where the draconian laws of Britishers on princely state Jhansi was accelerating in alarming rate due to which they face the biggest rebellion from Manikarnika. She explores their selfish motives to exploit Indians, their economic resources, and of course the land itself. She realises, East India Company looks for Jhansimerely a piece of land and Indians subjected to violence, inequality and injustice. This film represents the liberation of Manikarnika from being a traditional woman to a woman who governs and can speak for her identity, rights, her people as well as the honor of her land. The atrocity of the Britishers is evident in a scene when Dixshitji, the minister of Jhansi had a conversation with Bajirao II who informs that Britishers have taken everything from him whether it is palace or the title of 'Peshwa'.

How constructivism of woman can make passive nature her inherited trait becomes clear when Mani karnika says she will be unable to become a queen because she is not a Kshatriya (13:00-13:15). The constructive thought regarding feminization is also apparent from the mother of Gangadhar Rao who says, "ise to me halkimaryada bhisikhanipadegi (18:50-18:53)" just because she saw her

riding on horse which according to her is not a womanly task.

The exploitative attitude of East India Company with Jhansi is clear when an officer of the company in conversation with Sadashiv stressed to loot Jhasni and distribute among them but suddenly with a trick he emphasised that he actually talks about the rights of Sadashiv. The thrust of eco feminism is to save not only the objectification of woman and nature but each spec of life on earth. In a shot, of a song when queen's husband is about to shoot a deer, she stops him from doing criminal offense. Captain Gordon in a scene visits Jhansi with his troops, where devaluation of Indians is shot in a realistic manner where everyone on the streets bent down in gratitude of the Captain. The devaluation of the life of Indians is depicted merely like animals or slaves. In an instance, a soldier of the Company hits an old man with his gun to bend him down on the ground. Following conversation, occurred in palace with the queen depicts the patriarchal attitude of East India Company and Captain Gordon himself towards the devaluation of others merely as subjects.

Soldier: Sir, Rani abhibahutbholihaininko ye maloomnahiki
Captain Gordon
kesamnesabkosarjhukanapadtahai.

Gordon: Kitnibhibholi ho, ye to dekh hi liyahogahamsedarrkarpati ne khud hi choodiyanepehanrakhihain. Ye choodiyane Jhansi me rehnewalahaar koi pehnegaaurhamaresamnehar koi sarjhukega. Kahiyeinse, sarjhukaen.

Manikarnika: ye Sarnadarr se jhuktahainaabhiman se uthtahai, bass ankhon me ankhendaalsvabhiman se adarehtahai.

Gordon: Lakshmi Baijoankhedikhatahai, me wochehranahibhulatahoon. I promise you ye sarjhukega. (26:50-28:45)

In the very next scene we find her mother-in law counseling her not to wander outside with people of Jhansi but to remain inside the four walls of the palace and do households work. Mani karnika reiterates that it is essential to meet people to know about the welfare of the state and the people living in it. The next scene highlights the cruelty of officers of the East India Company who took young calf

away from Jhalkaribai forcibly which is saved by Manikarnika.

Next shot of the film gives us the glimpses of Manikarnika on the path of liberation. She liberates herself from traditional imposition that tries to persuade her to be in the palace. She instead went alone to meet officers of the Company who have taken calf to kill and eat. The following conversation shows her political valor and dignified character:

Officer1: who is she? You can't come inside without our permission. Didn't you see the board?

Officer 2: Bloody Indians.

Officer 3: How do you read English? Hahahahaha

Lakshmi Bai: I can read English. It's a mere language. Just words, words without culture have no meaning. Tum jisdharti par khadeho,yhanke logon ka, unkihavnaokasamaankarnaseekhlo, angrezihamarahunar hosktihai,hamarimaatrbbhashanahi,kionkemaatrbbhashaMaa hotiahaaurMaasirfekhotihai. (33:53-34:38)

Mankarnika appears in this shot as a stalwart of eco feminism because she does not only liberates animals they have capture but also ordered them not to touch living or non-living object. She is well read and a learned scholar which is evident in a conversation with an officer of the EAC. She overpowers him with her logical arguments and persuades him to prepare a battalion of British army for a *jhankion* the birthday ceremony of her son which is her achievement towards the path of liberation of Jhansi from the clutches of the company. The following shot throws glimpses of patriarchal mindset which believed that a woman cannot be equal to man and that is the reason Sadashiv keeps animosity for Manikarnika. Later Majaraj requests her to liberate Jhansi from the clutches of Britishers who are waiting like vultures to taken over Jhansi.

Eco feminism aims to curtail ideologies of dominance which emphasizes the imposition over others. Mani karnika is persuaded to follow traditional rituals after getting widowed. An Old woman says, "Durbhagyapooranhai par ab app ekvidhwahain. Pehlekeshkateyaengeaur fir kuchdinokebaad app koMaharajke Asthikalashkesath Kashijanahoga (59:05-59:20)." Manikarnika liberates herself from the pre-requisite rituals made for a widowed

woman and after *shaa* directly moves towards on the throne of Jhansi to fulfill her duties as a queen. Manikarnika exposes the stubborn attitude and agenda of East India Company to rule Jhansi in order to demean the lives of people and loot them from their rich economic resources. She says,

Manikarnika: Kanoonkiaad me lootneaa ye ho Gordon.

Gordon: Pichhlibaarbhiapneankhendikhaithi to menekasamkhayithiaapko is Mehal se baharfainkkaar hi chhodunga. Aajwo din aagyahaibaapyahan se sarjhuakarr hi niklogi. Sinhaasannahi, aabhoosannahi, Mehalnahi, kuchbhinahi.

Manikarnika: Gordon sahib ye Bharat hai. Yhanj sab chhodkarkhadahaiwo sab se badahai. Ye Rajmahal, ye Sinhaasanmujhe Rani nahibanatehai. Jhansi ke logon kapyar, unkavishwasmujhe Rani banatahai. Jhansi aabhbichahtehaiaur me bhifarksirfitnahaiapkorajkarnekeliyechahiyeaurmujheapno kisevakarnekiye (1:07:10-1:08:14)

The fight of Manikarnika with East India Company and Kangana Ranaut with male dominated Hindi film industry actually is an effort of women to, 'overturn modern constructions of nature and woman as culturally passive and subordinate.' (Preface)

Findings

Mani karnika has established new milestone for female actors in Bollywood that a woman can play the role of a leading actor having attributes being brave, independent, intelligent, and powerful, as a male actor used to be dominating in a film. Mani karnika as a film has broken all the traditional notions that focused always on the glorification of heroism of male actor as protagonist but Kangana Ranaut proves that a woman can be successful in the industry and can play the role of a protagonist or work as an independent director, also being commercially successful at the Box office. KanganaRanaut appears magnificent as well as inspiring in performing the role of Rani Lakshmi Bai, full of heroism similar to her male counterparts roles viz., Ranvir Singh as Bajirao (Bajirao Mastani), Rihit Roshan as Akbar (Jodha Akbar), Ajay Devgan as Tanaji (Tanaji). Manikarnika appears as an

inspiring figure for defending her land and people from the clutches of Britishers. Therefore, she at once, with her courageous voice speaks louder that, "*Me apni Jhansi nahidung*" which echoes the conservative attitude of eco feminism started by rural women in Uttarakhand who hugged trees to save them from the greedy capitalists who invade the forests of Garhwal Himalayas to make trees a commodity to enhance their capital.

Limitations

This research is bound to have limitations as it is solely focused on a single film. It is qualitative in nature and do not provide any quantitative data of research. The manifestation of research is aimed at analyzing Manikarnika in context to the dominating patriarchal culture of film making in first two decades of twenty first century in Bollywood. This study do not opt any cinematic tools to analyse the film as its main focus is in investigating the film with eco feminist lens in order to trace the devaluation of woman and nature and how a shifting paradigm has emerged in Hindi film industry so far as the role of woman as protagonist is concerned.

This research paves a way for a comparative study of films with the lens of eco feminism and in this regard *Manikarnika* and *Wonder Woman* are exciting examples where the representation of woman and nature in Hollywood and Bollywood can be demonstrated.

Conclusion

This film is highly significant in context to the thrust of eco feminism because Mani karnika not only liberates herself from the traditional construction of a woman but also enter in politics and fight for the liberation of her motherland. Mani karnika appears a woman who is not ready to surrender all her resources before the Colonizers. She fought for the lives of Jhansi and has become an exemplary queen and the biggest source of inspiration for generations to come. She wants every Indian to be free and breath in the air of Azaad Bharat. Kangana Ranaut has appeared as an actor who liberates herself from the traditional standards of the performance of a woman like mother, beloved, victim, meek or simply a passive character in nature to be obliterated so that the valor of the

hero can be justified. For the first time a female actor stood up for strengthening the role of woman in cinema. Manikarnika becomes special film not only because a woman is in the lead role but for the first time a woman is accepted on big screen with a commendable response from audience as well as critics. Mani karnika has come up as a savior of everyone who is in need of help. It is therefore pertinent to mention that cinema is a platform where patriarchy rules either through performances of male as hero or villain or making film as an artifact.

References

1. *Manekarnika*. Directed by Kangana Ranaut, et.al, performances by Kangana Ranaut, Atul Kulkarni and Muhammad Zeeshan, Zee Studios. 2019
2. Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. Routledge, 1996.
3. Warren, Karen. J. *Eco feminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters*. Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2000.
4. Georgy, Christina Mary. "Gender and Cinema: An Eco Feminist Reading of South Indian Films." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2019, pp. 97-71.
5. Wasima, Arifa. "Body, Border and Beyond: An Eco feminist Study of Srijit Mukherji's *Begum Jaan* and Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth*." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2018, pp. 319-325.