

# **Introduction**

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, the films have emerged as part of the visual literature which depicts the social realities in manifold ways. The Hindi film industry has played a significant role in this process since the beginning. The films like *Do Aankhen Barah Haath*, *Do Bigha Zameen*, *Mother India* and many such others have depicted the social and political facts and dreams of a resurgent India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The role of women in many of these films have been significant and they are often shown as important part of the social and personal life of characters in the films. And in the context, it may be worth investigating how the depiction of the roles of women have evolved along the time. The role of women should have evolved all along the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even in a male dominated, and to a large extent male chauvinistic movie like *Mughal-e-Azam*, the heroine is very strong and rebellious even in front of the emperor of India. However, such roles were often not relevant in their times as they were more on the screen and less in the real life situations. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with relatively more economic empowerment of women in the society, the roles of women in the society have also changed. The present study is an attempt to study how the roles of women have changed in the films that have hit the screen after 1990s. And we have tried to understand the role of women in these films and tried to categorize their roles in some main categories according to the general outlook of our dominant social framework.

To start with the title of the thesis, it is important to first explain the understanding of the words ‘myth’ and ‘metamorphosis’ on the basis of available dictionary meanings, and then how they are going to be used for the present research.

The Oxford dictionary defines myth as:

- A widely held but false belief or idea
- A fictitious or imaginary person or thing
- An exaggerated or idealized conception of a person or thing

[<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/myth>]

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as:

- A popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; especially one embodying the ideals and institution of a society or segment of a society
- An unfounded or false notion

- A person or thing having an imaginary or unverifiable existence  
[<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myth>]

The Macmillan dictionary defines myth as:

- Something that people wrongly believe to be true  
[<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/myth>]

The dictionary reference.com defines myth as:

- Any invented story, idea or concept
- An unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution  
[<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/myth?s=t>]

Now coming to the meaning of ‘metamorphosis’, it is basically a biological term which means “a major change in the form or structure of some animals or insects that happens as the animal or insect becomes an adult” [<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metamorphosis>] But here the general meanings given by these dictionaries have been taken, as they fit in the context of the present research.

The Oxford dictionary defines it as:

- A change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one  
[<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/English/metamorphosis?q=metamorphosis>]

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as:

- A major change in the appearance or character of someone or something  
[<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metamorphosis>]

The Macmillan dictionary defines it as:

- A major change that makes someone or something very different  
[<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/metamorphosis>]

The dictionary.reference.com defines it as:

- Any complete change in appearance, character, circumstances etc.  
[<http://www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/metamorphosis?3=t&path+/>]

Talking firstly about ‘myth’, in addition to these given meanings, Roland Barthes’ concept of ‘myth’ needs to be mentioned which stands completely relevant in the context. It is important to understand how does he call ‘myth’ a “system of communication” and hence “message” [2009:131]. According to Barthes, myth is a type of speech and is linked with history. It is actually “human history which converts reality into speech” [2009:132]. From that point of view, myth becomes a “speech chosen by history” [2009:132] and since the speech is a message in itself, myth actually becomes a mode of signification, a form. And it is not confined to oral speech only. It can include modes of writing and of representations and from that point of view photography, cinema, shows and various other possible forms of representation can be called ‘speech’. So anything can become speech if it means something. Hindi films portraying women are a ‘speech’ in themselves and this research intends to focus on the manner of their portrayal, which has generally been mythical for a long time.

According to Barthes, “myth is not defined by the object of its message but by the way in which it utters this message” [2009:131]. The same has happened with woman in our society that gets translated to these films. She is not considered to be a real flesh and blood woman with her individual feelings, desires, aspirations and ambitions. She exists only as the patriarchal society wants her to exist. As Barthes says, myth does not represent facts but rather human history through “motivation”, “intention” and “analogy”, a woman’s whole existence is a myth since she is ‘invented’ and actually ‘idealized’ to suit the norms and requirements of a patriarchal society with no concern for her independent or real existence.

The “very principal of myth” according to Barthes is that it “transforms history into nature” [2009:154]. What happens actually is that the dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes, and beliefs are made to seem entirely ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ and society in general is expected or rather instructed to follow them. Social (power) groups tend to regard as ‘natural’ whatever confers privilege and (more) power upon themselves:

“Myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a

world which is without contradiction.....things appear to mean something by themselves.” [2009:170]

In case of woman also, the same has happened. Myth has given a “natural and eternal justification” [2009:169-70] to whatever has happened with her. Tradition and society have never allowed a woman (from the very birth) to exist as a real human being with her natural traits, feelings and desires. She exists only as she is permitted to exist, that is, not as an individual but only and only as a woman (a myth) with all her so called feminine traits and virtues of chastity, purity, patience, affection, submissiveness, docility and what not. So she is “not born but rather becomes a woman” [1997:295] as Beauvoir rightly says. She is so much ‘naturalized’ with these ‘imposed’ patterns that she herself accepts them as a part of her personality.

The whole ideology of society thus gets framed and established in accordance with the needs of the power groups and nobody bothers the prejudice against the oppressed (here woman) who becomes a victim in the process. Simon de Beauvoir expresses her just concern for the woman when she says: “To assimilate her to Nature is simply to act from prejudice.” [1997:285] But the harsh reality is that even this ‘prejudice’ too has lost its existence in itself becoming ‘natural’.

Speaking about the role of myth, Beauvoir says that it is through myth that society imposes its laws and customs on women in such a way that it becomes a natural part of not only their upbringing but an acceptable part of the whole society as well and myth actually penetrates the existence of women via many intermediaries:

“...through the myths this society imposed its laws and customs upon individuals in a picturesque, effective manner; it is under a mythical form that the group-imperative is indoctrinated into each conscience. Through such intermediaries as religions, tradition, language, tales, songs, movies, the myth penetrates even into such existences as are the most harshly enslaved to material realities.”[1997:290]

Indian films have generally reinforced these patterns of social expectations. Women have often been shown as the guardians of tradition and honour. They are considered to be ‘ideal’ in all aspects, phases and stages of life. But anything ‘imposed’ always works against human nature and psyche. Whatever is imaginary

and fictitious cannot survive for long. Myth cannot pervade the reality eternally since myth itself is not eternal. It is possible that one myth may disappear and the other comes in. In the present context, it would be better to say that 'impossible' paves the way for the 'possible' and the 'real' finds its existence. Talking about the 'impossibility' of 'myth', Barthes mentions that there is only one language which is not mythical, and that is the language of "revolution". According to him:

"Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it makes the world; and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making. It is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth." [2009: 173]

Therefore myth abolishes when revolution announces itself. With the passage of time, the Indian cinema also has changed and evolved, reflecting new trends in gender relations. There are many film-makers who are sensitive enough to portray a change in the established gender roles. Taking these changes to be a kind of revolution in the portrayal of woman in Hindi cinema, the present research intends to find out how far the 'myth' has got abolished and what form the 'revolution' has taken, if there has actually been some change. Thus this socio-cultural 'metamorphosis' would be the subject of inquiry for the present research.

Films can be considered as cultural artifacts created by specific cultures, which reflect those cultures, and in turn, affect them. Films have evolved as a powerful art form, a source of popular entertainment and a powerful method too for sensitizing citizens. Interpretation or reading of a film is a full-fledged discipline in itself. As a discipline, Cinema Studies is extremely inter-disciplinary and it draws on the contents and methods of literature, history, sociology, political science and economics among others. No critical theory exists and survives on its own. The culture and society provide a base and background serving as the pillars, on which these theories are formed. In the current plethora of theories, cinema works and waits as a text to be written. The director, the script writer, the lyricist, the music director, other technical staff, the actor and the actresses are on the one side doing and

fulfilling their roles and audience on the other trying to understand, analyze, interpret or rather create and construct meanings from their own perspectives and positions.

Film theory, closely allied with critical theory, has emerged as an academic discipline that aims to explore the essence of the cinema and provides conceptual frameworks for understanding film's relationship to reality, to the other arts, individual views and society at large. Today Indian cinema is widely circulated outside the country to foreign audiences and it has become the screen through which many parts of the world 'see' India. Inspired from this status of Indian Cinema, the present research is an attempt to see and understand 'Indian Woman' from the perspective of feminist film theory.

While using the very word 'woman', feminist theory automatically comes to the mind. This theory being very wide in its range has several different theoretical approaches and positions yet the primary concern of all the theories remains the same. All aspire for equality in all aspects, craving for the 'empowerment'. Film is a crucial visible part of any feminist theory. It acts as a text providing a base to the possibilities and categories of representation of female identity and existence. The feminist film theory has developed very specifically since 1970s explaining how film acts as a 'social mirror' reflecting social power structures. Feminist film critics talk about the psychology of the patriarchal society under whose influence the woman is presented as what she represents for man and what he wishes her to be portrayed as, and the ironical consequence is that despite the enormous emphasis placed on her as spectacle, she remains largely absent as actually the 'Woman'. Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [1975] describes a psychic context in which voyeurism, fetishism and narcissism all structure film viewing. She has challenged the cinema of the past saying that the film reflects and reveals the socially established interpretations of sexual difference. Appropriating psychoanalytic theory, she has demonstrated the way "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form." [1992:158] According to her, the "silent image" of woman is only the "bearer" and not the "maker" of meaning. The woman signifies male desire and connotes "to-be-looked-at-ness." Citing Budd Boetticher in the context, she tells us:

“What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.” [1992:163]

Claire Johnston, when talking about the images of woman in cinema says that even the development in cinema has presented woman as “eternal and unchanging, except for modifications in terms of fashion etc.” She believes that the myths governing the cinema are just the same as those governing other cultural aspects. [1999:248] Agreeing with Barthes’ concept of myth, she believes that it is actually the myth as a form of speech or discourse which represents the major means in which women have been portrayed in cinema:

“It is in the nature of myth to drain the sign (the image of woman/ the function of woman in the narrative) of its meaning and superimpose another which thus appears natural...” [1999:249]

Images of women represented in films have generally reinforced the existing myths instead of subverting them. Most of the Hindi films also have reinforced gender roles rather than questioning them. It is important to understand and emphasize that the images of woman presented thus are not simply the mirrors of real life. They are rather the ideological signifiers. Feminist film theory has an important role to play here as it seeks to disempower the way women have been disfigured in films. It requires the film to be strategically revolutionary so as to challenge those who have manipulated it to suppress women. This is where Claire Johnston talks about a strategic use of media and film in particular in order to be revolutionary so as to challenge those who have manipulated the media with the purpose to suppress women’s creativity in all aspects. According to her, the objectification of women can be overcome and challenged by “developing the means to interrogate the male, bourgeois cinema”. [1999:254] Her conception of “women’s cinema as counter cinema” wants the cinema to be a “two-way process” where the film would work both as a political tool and as entertainment. [1999:254] Believing that films “reveal the society’s unconscious positioning of woman and the prejudices which work against her and her need for personal freedom” [Jain, 2009:10-11], Jasbir Jain, however, has



explored Indian Cinema for an analysis of the woman image in her journey towards self-definition. In *Films and Feminism* [2009], she has talked about the Hindi films portraying such changes and the film makers who have constructed strong self-reliant and purposeful women protagonists who step out and rise beyond their conventional concerns. These films are an attempt to portray the changing images of woman.

Films are a part of visual media and media is a very integral part of our lives. This generates a lot of public interest regarding the role it plays in any society. In this respect, media plays a crucial role in almost all aspects of daily life. On the other hand, media is said to be the reflection of society and on the other, it possesses the potential to influence cultural norms. Moreover, media appropriates a much larger space in our life than it did in the past. Films are a very emphatic medium which influence our society. Moreover, they reach a wider audience than literature. Sudhir Kakar has described cinema as “the primary vehicle for shared fantasies of a vast number of people living on the Indian subcontinent who are both culturally and psychologically linked” [1990:27]. Since the films construct reality in addition to reflecting it, the films that project women in right perspective from humanistic and rational point of view need attention and appreciation. Jasbir Jain rightly feels that “films need to be discussed more widely and more openly if we are not to be carried away by extravaganza. By discussing them we seek to legitimize our role as viewers.” [2009:15]

The relevance of the present research lies in making not only the audience but films directors and women artists also alert and aware; cautious and conscious of their roles and responsibilities in and towards the films. The women need to come out of the socio-cultural stereotypes. The transformation from that biased and fictitious identity to the real, genuine, individual existence is the need of the time. Films can do a lot in projecting a society free of all binary oppositions.

Before moving further in the research, it is important to present a brief history of Indian Cinema beginning from the age of silent films, trajecting down to the talkies of pre-independence era and then the post-independence cinema with the dawn of a new hope to the present time cinema blurring many categories, boundaries and differences, yet striving to achieve much more.

History of Indian Cinema dates back to the year 1896 when the Lumiere Brothers first demonstrated the art of cinema to the subcontinent. Bombay was the first Indian city that screened short films by the Lumiere Brothers. The cinematography of those films led to the screening of more foreign films and then the screening never ended. The Indian film industry is supposed to be the oldest and the largest in the world with a large number of films released annually.

This history includes the pioneering efforts of Save Dada (Harischandra Sakharam Bhatavdekar) who made a short film in 1899 and in 1901, he made the first news reel. The entire Indian entertainment sector underwent huge changes when the emergence of Dada Saheb Phalke took Indian cinema to new heights. Thus the path-breaking film of the Silent era, *Raja Harishchandra*, was released in 1913. The rapid growth of the Indian Cinema led to the end of the silent era and ushered in the era of the talkies. The first Indian talkie *Alam Aara* came in 1931. This era of talkies introduced the Indian Cinema in a completely new way to the audiences. Now one could hear the actors and actresses talk, laugh, sing and cry. It brought revolutionary changes in the whole set up of the industry. Initially films were primarily made in Hindi, Tamil, Bengali and Telugu and these proved to be phenomenal successes. However, during the silent era as well as the era of the talkies, the main sources for Indian films were the mythological texts.

Indian cinema has completed its hundred years. Its history can be broadly divided into three phases:

#### The Era of Silent Films:

The era of silent films lasted for almost two decades. To begin with, only three silent films were made in 1913. This number kept increasing every year. By the end of silent era in 1934, around 1300 films were made. The themes of silent films were invariably religious and mythological and sometimes social. *Sowkari Pash*, a film made by Baburao Painter in 1925, is supposed to be the first realistic film in an era of religious films based on a melodramatic formula.

#### Pre- Independence Talkies:

Foreign talkie films had been screened in India before the first Indian talkie was made. These films inspired Ardeshir M. Irani to make the first Indian sound

feature (talkie) *Alam Ara* in 1931. The film was in Hindi and had twelve songs in it. It was from here that songs and music became an integral part of Indian Cinema. The year 1931 witnesses the making of twenty-eight talkies of which twenty-three were in Hindi, four in Bengali and one in Tamil. The number of talkies kept increasing in subsequent years.

The traditions of realistic and melodramatic cinema ran parallel to each other in the era of talkies also but the dividing line between them was not as strong and clear as it became after independence and particularly in the era of 'new cinema' in the 1970s. Today films are known for their heroes and heroines but the films of 1930s and 1940s were known for their production companies. Bombay Talkies, Prabhat Films, New Theatres and Filmistaan were some of the famous film companies.

The films, to begin with, were not only silent but also devoid of any colours. Even talkies continued to be made only in black and white although attempts were made to import colours to films. In 1933, Prabhat Films got their film *Sairandhari* processed in Germany and this was the first coloured Indian film but even then, films continued to be made in black and white only for the first two decades after 1933. It was not until 1970 that the making of black and white film virtually came to an end.

During the pre-independence period, the struggle for independence altered the whole scenario. Although the Indian cinema did not directly contribute to the struggle for freedom for fear of being censured yet the ideas of freedom continued to be expressed indirectly through religious and historical cinema after such films had to face bans and censorship. The second major contribution of cinema during this period was in the field of social reform. *Achhut Kanya* (1936) focused on the question of social justice. Similarly *Sant Tukaram* (Marathi 1936) became a classic in the history of Indian cinema. The year 1936 witnessed the emergence of leftist movements and this was reflected in the cinema as well. A number of films were made that portrayed existing social contradictions in a realistic manner. It can be said that during this period, films were no longer limited to the periphery of entertainment, they were now potent instruments to educate the masses as well.

#### Post Independence Cinema:

Attempts at combining entertainment and social relevance in the cinema continued even after independence. Although the censor boards (created during the

British period) remained, film makers enjoyed greater liberty in making political and social films than they had before. 1950s is called the golden period in the history of Indian cinema. Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan, Bimal Roy, Raj Kapoor, Balraj Sahani, Nargis, Meena Kumari, Madhubala, Dilip Kumar made the screens graceful by either acting or direction. Besides them, numerous singers, composers, script-writers, cameramen and other technicians lend a helping hand in making some of the most outstanding films that carved their space in the history of Indian cinema. Hope, faith and optimism reigned supreme in the Indian society and people in the first two decades of the post-independence India. The newly won freedom had ushered in an era of hope among the people. They believed that in independent India, old promises would be fulfilled and new changes will bring about prosperity, equality and a better life for the common people. This romanticism was reflected fairly clearly in contemporary cinema. “*Dukhbhare din beete re bhaiya, Ab sukh aayo re*” (a song from the film *Mother India:1957*) was really the voice of this cinema. The cinema moved one step further with the release of K.Asif’s *Mughal-e-Azam* in 1960 which was followed by a trail of romantic films all over the film-industry.

While the commercial cinema enjoyed popularity amidst the film-watchers, there was another cinema which was running parallel to this. The hopes of the earlier decades of post-independence era had begun to turn into despair by the seventies. Deteriorating social situation motivated people into collective popular political action. This popular urge for social action found its voice in the new cinema also. It was called the new cinema or the parallel cinema. Its not that the tradition of realistic cinema was not there. It had always existed but now it became a very significant trend and also created a space for new experiments. This cinema was made possible by contributions from N.F.F.C. (National Film Financing Corporation) and financial assistance from state governments. This new cinema was of two kinds: the experimental cinema on the one hand and the ‘committed cinema’ on the other. The second category of cinema was essentially an expression of social protest. *Uski Roti* (Manikaul:1970), *Ankur* (Shyam Benegal:1974), *Sadgati* (Satyajit Roy:1981), *Paar* (Gautam Ghosh:1984), *Aakrosh* (Govind Nihlani:1980) etc. were some of the important Hindi films of this phase.

This new cinema did not flourish for long and had a somewhat premature end in the 1980s when actually the boundaries between mainstream cinema and parallel

cinema blurred. The same 1980s saw the rise of several women directors like Aparna Sen, Prema Karanth, Sai Paranjape, Meera Nair, and others which paved the way for some more sensible films on social issues. With romantic films at the helm, the Indian cinema ushered into 1990s. A mixed genre was witnessed during this time. Romantic thrillers, action as well as comic films were made. This was a period of dilemma for commercial cinema regarding the portrayal of women. On the one hand, it needed to portray contemporary woman to keep up with the increasingly demanding urban audiences but at the same time, it also needed to justify her representation as upholder of strong cultural values. And the result was the films as mix of modern and traditional values. The films of this decade were notable for objectifying women in songs with double meanings and also the explicit lyrics accompanied by sexual gestures. The cabaret numbers of earlier decades were re-invented in the nineties. Somaaya writes rightly in the context:

“The adrenaline pumping song sequences, with bold costumes, lyrics and dance movements, were performed by well-known leading ladies putting in a ‘special appearance’ and were now labelled as ‘item numbers’.” [2012:162]

Despite the domination of stereotypes, there were still the few who chose to break the moulds. These were the women who refused to conform to their ‘prescribed’ sexual, social and political identities. They were no more the “Sita-esque woman” [Somaaya,2012:169].

The millennium then brought in radical changes for the Hindi film industry which got an official recognition as an ‘industry’ and films began to work on a business model. Corporate entities and financial institutions stepped into film finance. Keeping pace with the time and technology, the cinema incorporated dolby digital sound effects, advanced special effects, choreography, international-appeal with some finer scripts and performances. The aesthetic appeal of cinema became important for the film-makers and all efforts were focused on making the film a financially sound product.

This decade saw a host of women directors including Kalpana Lazmi, Tanuja Chandra, Revathy, Honey Irani, Farah Khan, Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti and several others. There were also the NRI directors- Deepa Mehta, Gurinder Chadha and Mira

Nair, who returned time and again to the country for their plots. The women's space in films got a new identity with not only these women directors but also the changing social world.

Every now and then, we see some films made that are sensibly relevant for the whole society but now the film-makers are conscious enough to make realistic films (in terms of the characterization, the dialogue, the story, the costumes, or even the locales) within the parameters of commercial cinema. No such separate category as art cinema or parallel cinema exists now. Among this reality and present status of Hindi films, the present research is going to be an attempt to find out the changing images of womanhood. It proposes to explore post 1990 Hindi films for the roles, the characters, the stories, the situations, the professions, the dialogues, and various other possibilities that might exist in the portrayal of woman. Within the constraints of given time and space, we have selected those twenty films (out of the available data of the period specified for the present research) which portray the journey of women from myth to metamorphosis. The focus will remain specifically on analysing how these films show and project woman as an individual first, a human being primarily, with all natural human emotions and aspirations and most importantly, not only her ambition to fulfill her aims and dreams but very realistically the social obstacles in her path (which are obvious) and finally the remarkable success (if she achieves it) in accomplishing what she desires.

To facilitate the research, it has been divided into the following chapters:

The chapter "The Womanly Woman: The Desire Disclosed" will analyze the films that are bold enough to give an expression to the 'sexual' desires of the women protagonists who defying all socio-moral codes come forward with their 'body' to 'celebrate' their femininity with all its beauty and liveliness.

The chapter titled "The Wonderful Woman: The Stereotypes Subverted" will throw light on the films that depict women not as one-dimensional characters but rather as having different shades. The chapter has been further divided into four parts to look for the transformation that has taken place in the four traditional roles of women:

The Magnificent Mothers

The Vociferous Wives  
The Bold Beloveds  
The Dauntless Daughters

The next chapter titled “The Working Woman: The Domains Dominated”, deconstructing the conventional cocoons set for women, will focus on the films that portray women pursuing their careers with full conviction and commitment, thereby recognizing their hitherto hidden and unexplored potentials.

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