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**REPRESENTATION OF MIDDLE-AGED AND
ELDERLY WOMEN IN BOLLYWOOD**

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Abstract:

Media is said to reflect the culture in which it exists. The interaction between culture and media often gives rise to certain stigmas and stereotypes or propagation of prejudiced ideologies and behaviors. The aim of this paper is to analyze the how media deals with the phenomenon of ageing from a gendered perspective. Moreover, through instances from popular Bollywood movies with elderly female characters and a detailed review of the movie Leela with two middle- aged female protagonists, it will see how Indian cinema represents middle-aged and elderly women, simultaneously focusing on their negative portrayal of ageing women as well as the efforts that have been made to re-shape and re-invent their characters in order to challenge the stereotypes and stigmas attached to ageing. The description of representation will also aim to look into the discourses on 'successful ageing'.

Ageing, Ageism & the discourse on Successful Aging:

‘Human ageing is not solely the biological process of senescence—the gradual deterioration of bodily functions that increases the risk for morbidity and mortality after maturation. Human ageing is embedded in social contexts and is shaped by social factors’ (Ayalon & Romer, 2018). Societal interactions with ageing give rise to a range of perspectives and beliefs about this process. These perspectives sometimes tend to carry negative connotations and give rise to what has been termed as ‘ageism’ by Robert Butler. ‘Butler used the word ageism to describe “prejudice by one age group against another age group”. Butler argued that ageism represents discrimination by the middle-aged group against the younger and older groups in society, because the middle-aged group is responsible for the welfare of the younger and older age groups, which are seen as dependent’ (Ayalon & Romer, 2018). Dolan talks about the ‘formulation of the pathological gaze derives from Foucault, whose *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963/1974) suggests...split in the clinical gaze between knowledge of the normal and that of the pathological’ body through prior knowledge of normal, healthy bodies (Dolan,2013). When we apply this theory to the cinematic invisibility of older women, this ‘gaze pathologizes the body of the older female star through its knowledge of youthful feminine norms that enables the signs of aging to be recognizable and readable; and for these signs to be constituted as symptoms of abnormality’ (Dolan,2013) which also points towards the sexist and male dominant view of society which unevenly affects men and women. The paradigm of ‘Successful aging’ characterized by active life, good health and low risk of diseases, which has already been critiqued on several grounds such as- being the privilege of only a particular class and viewing aging negatively is seen by Dolan also as a male construct. She reflects on how representation of older women in Hollywood and commercials reinforces the discourse on ‘successful ageing’, such as endorsement of cosmetics for smoothening of wrinkles or cosmetic surgeries to ‘youthify’ the appearance of female star’s aging body’ (Dolan, 2013). She further borrows the idea of Naomi Wolf in the *Beauty Myth*, that the ‘normalized discourses of ideal feminine beauty privilege the appearance of youth over that of old age’ (Dolan, 2013).

The Gender-age gap and older-women’s sexuality in Bollywood:

When we talk about how Bollywood shows elderly people, we can see them mainly in the roles of supporting actors and are often seen surrounded by stigmas of ‘weakness’, ‘vulnerability’, ‘unattractiveness’, etc. Furthermore, elderly women are marginalised relatively more than their male counterparts. And while young women are overtly objectified and sexualised, middle-aged and elder women’s representation as ‘unattractive, non-sexual, motherly’ beings, is the extreme opposite of that. Carrying the above argument forward, we can see that there exists a gender-age gap Bollywood industry. A study by Live Mint on Bollywood movies released between 1990 and 2015, and ‘which featured 20 top male stars...shows the median age gap between male leads and

their romantic interest keeps widening as the men grow older' (Singh & Jha,2015). The fact that 'even as male actors grow older, the ages of their romantic interests remain practically unchanged' (Singh & Jha,2015) also explains why female actors of their own age lag behind and shift to the roles of wives, mothers or sisters. Rajvi Desai points out to the sexist ageism in Bollywood to explain why, in the movie *Bharat*, the actor playing the role of Salman's mother is nine years younger than him in real life and in the movie *Waqt: A race against Time*, Akshay's mother is five years younger to him in real life (Desai,2019). . The recent release of the movie *Saand ki Aankh* raised controversy over casting of two young actors to play the roles of 60-year old women. It was argued by a lot of old and middle-aged female actors that 'substantial older women roles are seldom written, and that it's a pity that when such roles do get written, they are still not offered to older women' (Richi,2019).

The representation of their sexuality is either invisible or at times comes out in the form of mockery. While we can see some instances of the former in the older female characters of movies like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001)*, *Hum Sath Sath Hain (1999)*, who can be seen restricted to the roles of mothers and grandmothers and carriers of culture and family values. In case of the latter, the role of 'Shanno' played by Himani Shivpuri in the film *hero no.1 (1997)*, who is the aunt of the Karishma Kapoor is seen having a flirtatious nature, rather seems like an exercise to justify the comic plot of the movie; similarly the role of 'Miss. Briganza' in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998)*, seems to have been made overtly sexual in order to maintain the comic element of the movie. In this way, Bollywood representations indulge in non-serious treatment of old women's desires, pleasure and sexuality.

While (Desai, 2019) a number of movies have been made with female protagonists in the recent, namely- 'Queen', 'Mardani', 'Veere Di wedding', 'Lipstick Under my burkha', and so on, older women have largely been underrepresented. There are still some movies which have attempted to re-invent the roles of older women and have even been successful in challenging a lot of stigmas surrounding their representation. I will be reviewing in detail the movie 'Leela' to view representation of the elderly and middle-aged women from the point of view of their agency and sexuality.

Reviewing Leela (2002) from a gender perspective (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012)

Leela is a 2002 film directed by Somnath Sen starring Dimple Kapadia and Deepthi Naval, Amol Mhatre and Vinod Khanna in the characters of Leela, Chaitali, Krishna and Nashaad respectively. The film begins with the backdrop of the death of Leela's mother following which she is in an emotional turmoil and decides to go to California as a visiting Professor to teach South Asian Culture. When she arrives in America, she is introduced to Krishna, a student in her class and his mother Chaitali who is a divorcee. The film is a blend of the American ideals that Krishna lives by and the Indian cultural ideals re-enforced by Leela and Chaitali. As the story goes on further, both Chaitali and Leela are seen as victims of bad marriages. While Leela is married to a poet who claims to be progressive and is yet is a patriarch who makes decisions for Leela, Chaitali divorces her husband because he treats her like a servant. Leela's narrative reveals that she is in an open marriage, but further in the film it becomes clear that this arrangement only benefits her husband who is called a 'philanderer' for his frequent, casual sexual relationships with other women, while Leela is in constant turmoil. It can be seen that even though she is not happy with such an arrangement, she still chooses to continue with this because she believes that she is her husband's 'muse'. On the surface, it seems quite unreasonable why such an educated woman chooses to stay in a bad marriage. But when we look deeper into it, we can see how Nashaad manipulates her emotionally which makes her believe that she is the only one whom he truly loves, and that he feels nothing for the women he has sexual relationships with.

Simultaneously, Chaitali is in a relationship with a man, which she keeps a secret from her son out of a fear of disapproval, which turns out to be true. When Krishna comes to know about her relationship, he leaves the house out of anger. It is surprising to see how Krishna,

who lives by ideals of privacy, freedom and personal choice, rejects all these principles when it comes to his mother. This is an example of how even a younger male exercises control and reinforces patriarchy within the family. Chaitali is then victimized and seen pleading to Krishna's father (her ex-husband) to talk to their son, who tells her to 'create a situation where her men want to stay with her', an utterly sexist remark which seems to be justified in the film. Even when it is quite clear that Chaitali is looking after her son even after the divorce, the complete blame for driving her husband and son away is placed on her, who also breaks up with her boyfriend out of guilt following this incident. Soon, both Leela and Chaitali, who had become very good friends and had been able to relate to each other, are pitted against each other when Leela and Chaitali's son Krishna grow fond of each other.

Krishna accepts a bet by his American friends that he will sleep with his teacher i.e., Leela, which I feel is a very Western and sexist way to stir sexual initiation between the two characters. Amid her conflicting marriage, Leela is at a point where she completely breaks down over her husband's sexual episode with another woman, and Krishna is seen comforting her following which we see a scene of sexual intimacy between the two which has been shown symbolically. Chaitali comes to know about this and ends her friendship with Leela. Leela is overridden by guilt, and while Krishna tries to convince her that her husband is responsible for her grief, she is still reassured that her life belongs with him after her husband apologizes to her and she falls into the same emotional trap. Krishna also confronts with her husband who claims that Leela is very 'delicate' and that her life belongs with him in India. Nashaad also gets concerned that Leela has changed when she appears to exercise her agency. Finally, the movie ends with Leela making a decision to leave both men and live her life only for herself.

Though this movie needs to be appreciated for exploring the lives and desires of two middle-aged women, it still somewhere seems to be stuck between the images of a modern, educated woman and a cultural Indian woman. Leela's association with culture studies and her characterization as a typical married Indian woman, Chaitali's image of a modern but intruding Indian mother which is also followed by Krishna's acceptance of Indian values who appears in a kurta in the end, also show women in specific stereotypical roles. The focus of the movie oscillated between the conflicts in the life of Leela and the existing cultural-modern tension between characters. Since, my aim was to see it from the angle of sexuality, I feel that the film lacked exploration of the sexuality, intimacy and desires of the lead characters.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, middle-aged and elderly women's roles seem restricted to mothers and sisters, yet there have been several films in which their roles have differed for non-stereotypical representation. The gendered-age gap in Bollywood where a female actor's professional career tends to end by the age of 30, while her male counterparts never seem to retire points out to the male oriented nature of production and viewership in Bollywood. The 'glamorous image' and 'sexualized young body' is of more value in commercial cinema while the characters, experiences and lives of middle-aged and older women carry no significance. Moreover, the notion of successful ageing has a gendered impact in that it pressurizes aging women to preserve their youthfulness, use cosmetics and undergo surgeries. When it comes to their sexuality, it is either symbolic of a comic element, repressed in nature or completely non-existent. However, efforts to show real lives and experiences of old women that brings out their concerns can also not be ignored and their recent visibility in cinema needs to be appreciated.

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