

**The Woman of Indian Cinema: A Comparative Analysis of the
Female Identity in Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika* (1977) and
Amit Ravindernath Sharma's *Badhai Ho* (2018)**

Naveeta Negi

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Satyawati College Evening,
University of Delhi, New Delhi

Dr. Nutan Agarwal

Professor & Head,
Department of English,
Bundelkhand College, Jhansi (U.P.)

Abstract

The woman's body has always been the site of conflict, and the films of a country like India showcase that in their own ways. The objective of this paper is to showcase the way a woman has progressed or even digressed in some ways towards the end of an unjust way of the world.

Keywords: *Indian Cinema, Woman in film, The female voice, Feminism, Badhai Ho, Bhumika, Family.*

Indian cinema has gone through a long list of generational discoveries and rediscoveries. Whether it be the necessary patriotism of post-independent India or the exploration of the modern angry young man through the tropes of kitchen-sink drama, Indian cinema has had one thing in common- the quest for the self. This paper aims to probe into the pursuit of the female self and to examine how far it has travelled from the ground of Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika* (1977) to Amit Ravindernath Sharma's *Badhaiho* (2018).

In films around the world, retrospection has been known to be used as a device for the spectators to understand the character; more specifically what drives a character's decisions and especially their demeanour. *Bhumika* is a biopic unlike any; based on the autobiography of the doyenne of Marathi theatre and cinema Hansa Wadkar, Benegal sets the filmy fantasies with the bleak reality of life. Wadkar was living in times when words like feminism had not been popularised in India and Benegal, very carefully, makes sure to avoid the didactics seeping into the screenplay. The viewers find themselves attached to a magnetic force that easily transcribes Usha's fierce and vulnerable personality.

In simpler terms, one can easily put this film as Usha's experiences with different men. These men appear at different points in her life, adding somewhat like the building blocks of her personality. Girish Karnad's keen writing makes for edgy character arcs, that would occasionally make you question their decisions and mostly make you uncomfortable through it. The creators have projected Usha as incomplete

and mostly like an empty jar of sorts, as Anuj Kumar opines in his review for *The Hindu*; her entire persona is like a search for things she would like to collect and with every man that comes into her life she tries to find her something that she could assimilate into her 'self.'

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argues that women were at a disadvantage in a society where they grew up under "a multiplicity of incompatible myths" about women. So, instead of being encouraged to find their own dreams and pursue meaningful projects for their lives, Beauvoir posits that the myths proposed to women, whether in literature or history, science or psychoanalysis, all encouraged them to believe that a woman's only purpose in life was to be a tool for others – and especially for men. (Beauvoir, 56). In *Bhumika*, the men, all of them, are a temporary solution to her problems at a specific point in her life. Keshav Dalvi, played by Amol Palekar happens to be the only constant force in her life ranging from a grooming adult to an overbearing and demanding husband. She resorts to his proposal of marriage only because she doesn't want to be tied down by her own family and their restrictions. But after marrying him, she realises the toxicity in her marriage, and the relationship altogether, thus forced to look for a man in Anant Nag's Rajan, a fellow actor, who claims to be in love with her. He's scared to marry and doesn't want to be the reason for her divorce but he provides his support unconditionally. Smita Patil stubbornly tries to hold onto her free will in the endless performance of being a woman, duty-bound to and by so many different men, shuffled off to jail after jail, different faces for the same situation. Whenever occasionally she finds happiness in comforting others, she resists once it becomes her obligation instead of her choice, concentrating the viewer's mind on the fact that these feminine duties have nothing to do with the task at hand and everything to do with control. Controlling a woman becomes everything to society when it sees that things are falling apart, it is an endless cycle of generational trauma and fear, where the only way to truly escape is to give in. There is also a slightly different angle about the film industry, that one must sincerely note, which is the exploitation of women where being an actress serves as a metaphor for the expectations and attempts to fill different roles while trying not to lose herself, even when the woman in question isn't entirely sure who that is or what she wants. The filming of a movie is just another way to exert control over women rather than an indictment of the industry specifically, that image is everything. As the film peels back the layers of identities and falsehoods and brutal reality, in the end, she is miserable, but it is solely by her own hand.

However, that still leaves Usha longing for a man who is the most ideal person to be with. Eventually, she meets Vinayak Kale, played by Amrith Puri, a simple businessman, who, literally and figuratively, lives far away from the showbiz of the film industry. She feels that her desolation would somehow connect with his fragmentary life, thus she gives him her all, only to realise that this was a mistake as well. When she starts living in his house, she feels trapped and paralyzed. Her suffocation forces her to leave him as well and finally learns to be alone.

The second film in the analysis here is Sharma's *Badhai Ho*. Priyamvada is the mother of the family, a kind and nurturing mother, who emotionally blackmails her son to play Housie with her kitty party friends. Nakul (Ayushmann Khurrana), like every other son, is annoyed by his mother but loves her to the core. Nakul, shown to be the main protagonist of the movie, has a nice life that revolves around his ordinary

Delhi family and his sweet girl-next-door type girlfriend Renne (Sanya Malhotra). The plot entangles when his father Jitendra aka Jeetu (Gajraj Rao) impregnates Priyamvada, as this initiates an entire phase of log kyakahenge (what will people say) and thus Nakul starts ignoring his colleagues, friends as well as Renne, in order to avoid any shame. The story revolves around the 9 months of pregnancy and how the family faces issues from the so-called developing society.

The film's main storyline is the world turning upside down for the Kaushik family when the middle-aged mother gets pregnant. There is certain warmth in the conventionally assigned quirkiness of the film's various characters and their external and internal conflicts. Gajraj Rao, who plays the father Jeetendra Kaushik, in a seemingly simple performance, shines in his common man turned helpless husband and father. He manages to avoid any lapse into a caricature with different shades as his character is built on little touches and details of gestures and expressions by the actor—the common man/TT who won't give away a mango easily as a tip, the vyakul (distracted) romantic poet burdened by the guilt of late fatherhood and the responsibilities laid ahead and the utter embarrassment of being judged by friends, family and neighbours. Rao gets the many everyday eccentricities of a regular householder spot on.

Neena Gupta as the older mother-to-be is so comfortable in her own skin that she doesn't seem to be acting at all; it all amalgamates in the standout scene of the couple interacting with their son's girlfriend. Surekha Sikri steals her spotlight as much as she can, in form of the gamma (grandmother) who understands the tropes of biology better than the younger generations occupying the same space as her. (Joshi)

Ye bhi koi mummy papa kekarne ki cheezhai (Is this something for the parents to do), says Nakul Kaushik (Ayushmann Khurrana) to his girlfriend Renee (Sanya Malhotra) when the two are trying to form some conjugal relations of their own. The 'something' in question here is sex. Badhaai Ho is about the inability to come to terms with one's parents having sex, seeing their relationship as conveniently chaste despite knowing very well how kids come about in this world. Nakul has to face up to the fact when his mother Priyamvada Kaushik aka Babli (Neena Gupta) gets pregnant, and the whole plot is about him coming to terms with this.

The film captures the little, seemingly hopeless conflicts of a middle-class family very well. Badhaai Ho does a fine job of depicting middle-class self-righteousness when it comes to matters of sex and its hypocrisies or for example, in putting the mother on the pedestal, but yet again, it fails to do anything about the woman in question. Neena Gupta, who plays Priyamvada, righteously steals the show but solely based on her acting chops. The writing does next to nothing to explore the realities of a woman going through geriatric pregnancy and everything to showcase how her son finally comes to accept something that had nothing to do with him in the first place. It's in the film's pointless conclusion that things unravel. The convenient and sentimental 'it's all about loving and accepting your family' route doesn't quite work with the otherwise cheeky tenor at the start of the film.

In Bhumika, one finds Benegal's protagonist to be struggling throughout her life. She wants to breathe, but she can't. She wants to sing and dance for her own self, but the people around her see this and exploit her very desire to their own benefit. She is

never given a formal education, as she simply initiates into the traditions of a Krishna Dasi and eventually a film actress. She transforms from the daughter to being the sole breadwinner of the family, yet never archives the respect that comes with it. She is dealing with the frail ego of a husband, the crying need of a daughter, and the expectations of a conventionally patriarchal mother. She is expected to fulfil all these roles for all these people, yet it is her own self that she ends up losing. Beauvoir's theory talks exactly about this exploitation. And on the other hand, Sharma's *Badhai Ho* simply limits the woman to the family domain. With Usha of *Bhumika*, the woman tries to break free, but with *Badhai Ho*'s Babli, the woman is simply too old to step out. Her life is governed by the acceptance of the men around her. Her fault doesn't lie in the fact that she got pregnant, the fault is in the fact that she had the audacity to have sex. The woman's body has always been the site of conflict, and here this woman's act of getting pregnant was an assertion of her sexuality. The film, however, renders her completely powerless when the narrative becomes about the people around her 'forgiving' and 'accepting' her repercussion.

Conclusion

Beauvoir's theory of conceptualising the woman comes straight forward, where the woman of the newly independent India raised her voice and fought for what she believed to be her right, even if it was her right to simply make mistakes. The woman of the twenty-first-century Indian cinema, however, is rather more dependent on the perception of others to enact anything of her own, very well under the sweeping right-wing nationalism's idea of the ideal woman of the century, therefore, kicking to the curb the finest of the equal rights to exist only in ideas.

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