

Article
Pranjal Borah

In Quest of a New Hermeneutic Loop: A Microcosm of Woman's Social History in 'Page 3' and 'Akashi Torar Kothare'



“Whether it is the 'formula' of a Bollywood film or the films produced in different languages in the states of India or the so called 'art films,' all these provide a mirror in one way or another into the way in which our mind works. It is in a way a projection of the whole tapestry of Indian culture. It can be treated as an entry point for understanding the legitimization of social and political power through narrative forms, commanding the widest of social constitution, The broader issues of social and political teleology are refracted in cinema through the characteristic concerns. With the help of categorization with genre and stylistic analysis, along with the wider perspective within changing cultural and social set up, it can lead to revelations of progression or regression.” (Indubala Singh, Gender Relations and Cultural Ideology in Indian Cinema, p.2)

In cinema flares a veracious microcosm of social history and cultural politics. Cinema, popular or parallel, an enormously popular and powerful visual art of storytelling, entertainment, infotainment and edutainment mirrors the contemporary

society in which it operates. From tearjerkers to candy-floss romances to action-thrillers to hilarious comedies to horror flicks to intensely serious social pictures, cinema lives on ideas and imaginations stimulated

by its surroundings. The images cinema creates, surreal or real or fictitious need to be in concordance with societal aspirations and fundamental penchant of humanity to recreate. The Lumieres Brothers held the supposedly first private screening of projected motion pictures in 1895 in Paris. Just a couple of years later in 1898, Boleslas Matuszewski, one of the first pioneering filmmakers and film scholars argued for the documentary and historical value of film calling upon his fraternity to recognise film as a source of meaning in his pioneering call for the creation of a visual histories depository in Paris. Thus quite evidently attempts to construe historical value of cinema literally date back to its time of inception. Cut to the present, a hoard of historians, following the footprints of Matuszewski, value film as a source for historians, but beyond that, their views appear to diverge in a way that suggests the evolution of film studies over the last century. The dominant argument is that despite the 'refuse-to-die' contentions about films as a medium of history, films, as contemporary historians like Rosenstone rightly assert, increasingly epitomize our relationship to the past and impinge on our understanding of history. Marc Ferro views cinema as a new form of expression for history. Again Indian scholar Jyotika Viridi propounds how class, gender, culture, heterosexuality, religions and the visions and ideas of nation state are all mingled together in cinema to suggest and bring out a pattern of cultural and social history. For Indubala Singh, cinema is a site that gives an outlet to the problems and paradoxes of a given society. She explains how the cultural patterns facilitate the process of filmmaking and give an insight into the ways the Indian psyche operates in its collective consciousness. It is from this perspective that this study aims at bringing

under microscope two of the contemporary seminal Hindi and Assamese feature films— 'Page 3' (Dir: Madhur Bhandarkar, 2003) and 'Akashi Torar Kothare' (A Tale told thousand times, Dir: Manju Bora, 2003) as a substantial socio-historical document .The present study is intended to focus on the woman protagonists of the select Hindi film as well as Assamese film in quest of some significant social history . An endeavour to study social history in the portrayal of woman protagonists in Indian films can pave the way for exploring and understanding certain patterns of dominant social tenors and ideologies peculiar to Indian milieu. This study aims at probing into the many facets of woman's on screen image vis-a-vis the gender relations, societal norms and ideologies. It is intended to delve into the socio historical positioning of Indian woman from the perspective of current postcolonial feminist history/historiography. Studies on the portrayal of women in Indian films have so far been mostly falling back on a methodology not surpassing beyond content analysis. Searching history for continuities and transition in the filmic representation of women is expected to offer clues to the way it configures our present culture and law and thereby a veracious pattern of social history in general and woman's social history in particular.



If films are the mirror of the society, then it also reflects the social structure and

mindset of the society. As such the representations of women in the films are based on the male perspective of them. Such parochial portrayal dwarfs the possibility of the dynamic aspects of women. The stereotyped portrayal becomes fixated and the women can never grow out of that screen life. The projection of women in this manner has the capacity to influence the society as well. The viewers carry that image and they weave a similar image of the women in screen life as a true representation of the women in real life. Once their opinions are shaped, these viewers not only try to locate a similar image in real life, but also aspire to promote the same to which many women readily conform to. Cinema has the immense potential to influence the socio-cultural life and mindset of the people. A cursory inquest into the history of films also reveals that this gender disparity exists in the film industries of all the countries around the world. The virtual celluloid ceiling, a counterpart of the glass ceiling is perpetually present in the film industries that straddles the progressive growth and participation of women in the films. Although the women in cinema and its genre-straddling hybridity and potential are all readily palpable, a genre based evolution of films in relation to representation of women in films is what can be instantly traced in the history of cinema.

Cinema epitomises more than any other medium *homo sapiens*'s most vital concerns as well as aspirations. It possesses the unique capacity to arrange and rearrange time, motion and space, and thereby to reveal dimensions that are profoundly social, historical, political, aesthetic, psychological, and even personal. Increasingly social scientists have broken away from a social history that chronicles battles, treaties, and politics to one that tries to provide a microcosm of the way daily life unfolded for

the masses : how they worked, what they did for pleasure and entertainment, how families were formed or fell apart, or how the fabric of daily life was formed or transformed. Thus in contemporary socio-historical studies, there is a shift of focus from the battlefields to the so called ordinary lives of ordinary people. Cinema is one such area which is now closely probed into by all social scientists as cinematic texts contain myriad aspirations, hopes, desires, predicaments and other complexities of society and its people. Twentieth century is one period which is more or less well documented in photography, films and documentaries. This provides the social scientists and historians with ample data and resources to analyze and interpret the man and his milieu.

An attempt to construe a veracious microcosm of woman's social history through a reading of the woman protagonists depicted in contemporary Indian cinema is certainly a terrain less trodden. The researcher embarking on a mission to explore women's social history in post colonial Indian films through popular and parallel Hindi films encounters a variety of scenes which bring to life visual narratives of sexualization, victimization, patriarchal social dynamics, politics of nationhood and sanctified family as metaphor for it, cultural politics and gender relations. Although Hindi films are replete with women characters they are hardly given centrality and depth. It is often alleged by feminist scholars in India that Indian films are awfully bereft of film space given to women protagonist. The image of women on the screen, it is lamented, is highly delimited and debilitated. Given this readily tangible gender politics permeating through Hindi cinema with just a handful of exceptions in both Hindi cinema and regional cinema, the question becomes a pertinent one how to chart out a social history of women

falling back on such film narratives. A plausible answer to such an intriguing question probably consists in critiquing women's roles in the periphery or in relocating and reorganizing their positions, probing into whatever representational values they epitomize in a larger socio historical prospective. Both the films chosen for this study fit into a solid hermeneutic loop which may, in turn, facilitate a critique of woman's social history .



In the turn of present millennium, there were significant number of films where contemporary society was interpreted through the experiences of woman protagonists. Madhur Bhandarkar is such a film maker who uses the protagonist to expose the seamy shades of a particular culture, social phenomenon or practice. "Chandni Bar" (2001) talks about the life and times of a bar girl Mumtaz, and brings to fore the sleazy side of the city—the exploitation, the despondency and the eventual permanence of the system. "Satta" (2003) is the story of a liberal, educated young woman Anuradha who falls in the love with a politician's son and marries him. Even as the corruption of her father-in-law and her husband is divulged, she is forced to step into politics where she has to learn to play one or two tricks of power to survive. 'Page 3' (2005) belongs to the same genre which realistically takes a dig at the depressing time of the contemporary society.

'Page 3' tells the story of Madhavi and her friends Gayatri, a struggling Bollywood actress and Pearl, a bold and cheeky air hostess who wants to marry a rich tycoon. The deceptively plastic life of high society is exposed and explored through the eyes of Madhavi Sharma, a tabloid journalist as well as a sensitive human being. The film unravels a realistic picture of the hypocrisy, betrayal, high handedness, heartlessness and the objectification of woman rampant in the high society promoted and regulated by celebrities. The central character Madhavi is confronted with a chance either to break the myth and rebel against or surrender to this superficial life.

'Page 3' thus portrays the story of the young tabloid journalist Madhvi who reports on Page 3 about the life of celebrities. The naivety of the audience is shared by the reporter, which is soon shattered as her experiences reveal the shallowness and sheer abuse of power that besmirch the rich and the famous. Her life begins to go haywire when she attempts to enter mainstream reporting. She soon tastes the bitterness and callousness of brutal male hegemony often hidden behind the glossy exterior of Page 3 life. On a fateful afternoon, she catches her boyfriend, an upcoming model, having sex with his gay friend in his apartment, an arrangement that will ensure him career boost.

As the story proceeds, once a well-established star seduces her small-town roommate Gayatri, an wannabe actress. When the girl attempts suicide, Madhavi accuses the actor, and quickly gets a taste of his power. She is asked to apologize or lose her job. Later, she is shocked to find her roommate back in tinsel town, now ready to sleep with her director in order to get the roles she wants. When she breaks a story about a paedophile

business tycoon and trafficking of young boys, it is put on hold and she is fired. After her disastrous exposures to grim realities, Madhavi, who has to live on her meagre earning as a journalist, somehow manages to get back her job and ironically, she can have a room only in the so called Page 3. She is back to working on glamour crowd but this time, with a bitter recognition of the grim beneath the glitter. Thus Bhandarkar interprets modern society using his female protagonist Madhvi in 'Page 3'. All of Madhavi's attempts of resistance yielded virtually no positive results but landed her up in a grim realization. As an active participant and observer of the social milieu that she herself inhabits, she realizes a positive change is still a far cry when it comes to the institutionalized corruption and the impact of the intrinsic gender bias in a social system that reeks of an unholy nexus between patriarchy and power relations. Madhavi's experiences end up hinting crystal clear that in Hindi films resistance of the characters works only as a veil to the 'intention' and 'agency'. As Madhur Bhandarkar's "Page 3" veraciously reveals, this resistance is normally given rise to by an intuitional or situational crisis within the diegesis itself, although this might only be temporary and the demands of narrative closure restore the status quo. Madhavi in 'Page 3', however, emerges as one of the handful of contemporary women characters who have found a space in the Hindi mainstream films as a protagonist whose point of view is skillfully and realistically used to create a slice of contemporary social reality.

Manju Borah's most acclaimed, multi award winning film, 'Akashi Torar Kothare' (A Tale Told Thousand Times, 2003) revolves around the atrocious gender bias that refuses to go in a traditionally patriarchal society even today. The film subtly depicts the age-old suppression of woman despite her vital role in

the upbringing of the family and well-being of the society at large. It is about the pains and voiceless suffering of the archetypal woman in a traditional society defined and regulated by male hegemony. The film is a strong, somewhat unconventional portrayal of a woman protagonist rarely seen in Assamese Cinema. Obviously this film stirs a string of women liberation movement minus the pro-activist as it shows a passive protector who ultimately refuses to toe the happy-go-lucky housewife's line of thinking.



The story is about Akashitora, a vibrant and young scholar doing research on the status of woman through the folklores of Assam. Thus she comes to know how the womenfolk down the ages have been subjected to a multitude of tyrannical experiences. The traditions reveal to her that the young girls were forced to become Devadasis to entertain the rich and the powerful. Even old women were made to dance nude to propitiate the gods to shower benevolence on human beings. Visibly disturbed Akashitora finds an apparently liberal and compassionate friend in Raghava who wishes to help her every possible way in her research. But once they get married, the stubborn male chauvinist in Raghava manifests itself shattering Akashitora's world. She has to abandon not only her passion, her own self but is forbidden to meet her old acquaintances. Devastated at heart, she virtually surrenders to her fate with little of

visible resistance. But her passive protest gains some semblance of a voice in her ultimate refusal to succumb to the archetypal house wife's happy-go-lucky kind of conformism. Akashitora finally emerges as a new voice of Indian woman who still has the gusts, though frail and meek, to assert her own will in a refuse-to-change patriarchal socio-cultural set up. She may not be a Menoka or a Jayanti to topple her archetypal identity, but still retains a diehard passion to cast off the agony and trauma of an essentialist identity after a series of ordeals. According to Judith Mayne, "one of the most basic connections between women's experience in any culture and women's experience in film is precisely the relationship of spectator and spectacles since women are spectacles in their everyday lives". Hence, there is something about coming to terms within, from the perspective of what it means to be an object of spectacle. Manju Borah makes the film in a manner that a woman viewer can identify with the trauma of her female protagonist. She decodes the socio-moral codes that have been used and carried along as a part of patriarchal system and which have been internalized by the women for ages.

Even a cursory glance at Hindi cinema since independence unveils before the connoisseur that Hindi films hardly present a picture of quantum change in women's lives since independence. Denying any substantial transition of values and substance, the films at best flimsily focus on their struggles and the fragile equilibrium between public and private life. When emancipated women are given a spotlight or centrality, they turn out to be objects of contempt, confusion, and even mockery. Reinvented and restructured

traditions stimulated by the process of modernization never cease to hamper women in certain specific manners. Art house or parallel cinema, however, stood out as challengingly powerful and insightful than the mainstream ones mainly through the exploration of the woman image as a rebel against her essentialist identity in spite of being a part of predominant patriarchal set up. Women's resistance is a response to the dominant discourse and hence not to be seen in isolation from cultural representations. Even popular Hindi cinema often derided for being hegemonic in its unbending patriarchal discourse is not all monolithic. Popular Hindi cinema in a bid to win the audiences hearts and find a strategy to build up a matrix of conflicting situations in social relations often accommodate the subaltern resistance against the elitist in the form of representation of woman protagonist and her socio-psychological milieu. Although the invisible power of sustained hegemonic control is readily tangible in such representation, such moments of the display of woman's power of resistance, control and change provide a good opportunity to scrutinise and interpret the narrative against the otherwise intractable ideology of patriarchal control and cultural politics. However, cinematic representation of women in the last couple of decades has undergone a change. Hindi films have begun to portray women with agency: they refuse to suffer as victims, fighting back instead to speak their voice and even emerge as stoic survival figures. This is what spectacularly looms large in both "Page 3" (Pearl and Madhavi, and even Gayatri to some extent) and Akashi in "Akashi Torar Kothare" (though as a survival figure she is somewhat meek and frail). They all bring to life a readily discernible paradigm of change and continuity for the destiny of Indian woman that pops up in the narratives.

The representation of women in Indian films presents a pretty curious and predictable pattern which is often stereotypical. It consciously or unconsciously draws blood from the dominant forms of patriarchal ideology in gender relations and delineates women subdued and subjugated as either the nurturing mother, the chaste wife, the vamp or the educated modern woman—images knowingly or unknowingly molded by mythic traditions. In most of the films chosen for the present study, the female protagonists are found to be conditioned by their personal and collective gender experiences. They confound and get confounded by both gender relations and culture, which tend to trap the women more than their respective male counterparts in the films. In India's context, the feministic approach brings to the fore a series of complicated queries: whether the images of Indian heroine have conformity with their actual roles in society or they are myth dependent; whether their roles are dictated by the mythical view of femininity and what is the stand of contemporary woman towards gender relations; and how Indian films interpret sexual difference while controlling representations and perspective of eroticism; and whether only women oriented movies incorporate female protagonists or women are simply marginalised in the main stream movies. In India, female behaviour is conditioned by their consistency through societal norms, which is regarded as the honour of the family. With this objective in view, the

society encodes many behavioural patterns which indirectly induce dependence of women. Both the films in question could be a source of critical probing at varying degrees in different forms such as casteism, myths, rituals, cultural conventions and gender relations whereby the female protagonists' cultural ethos is probed into. The irony is that women in Indian cinema seem to be revolting against patriarchy through exposition of their sexuality, but practically they are rather jinxed by self-surrender.

Both the films selected for the study virtually qualify themselves to confront a feminist critique and so are all the female leads in them. While there are female stereotypes invariably cast in the mythic Sati- Savitri image to feed the male ego, there are protagonists who pop up as strong, gritty survivors and rebels. But given the hybrid nature of the cultural life they live and the way it reacts upon their lives, their varied and troubled gender experiences, their pains and pangs and plight as women trapped in a patriarchal set up, their occasional revolts, their penchant for emancipation and empowerment casting off their essentialist identity, their different survival strategy are all too tenuous a domain to construe a distinct and indigenous thread of feminist hermeneutics. At least the present study involving the two films does not facilitate or hint at any such sustainable scope.

Although the woman image depicted in Indian cinema offers a reliable, veracious spectrum of her non linear social history as the

present study suggests, the life she lives and experiences in reel is never really an exact replica of the same she does in reality. It is distinctly and unambiguously a mediated past, or for that matter present deliberately and purposely coloured by choice of specific themes, the strength of creative writing, the dominant palates of the time, contemporary production needs, and the filmmakers' subjectivity. Films, specially the ones which are readily visible and accessible on the public domain and part of a commercial set up and distribution mechanism are a modicum of art and aesthetics, fictitious elements and fantasies, melodrama and theatrics. They are intended to provide the viewers with entertainment or infotainment or edutainment or even all of them. They do not willfully tread along the path of academic and epistemological discipline and objectivity, which the official discipline of history does. If the mainstream potboilers and middle of the road movies are solely concerned with making money by building up a pleasure quotient in concordance with the popular tastes of the time and production and genre needs, the parallel or art-house films, known to capture life and its subtle paraphernalia, are overtly impinged on by the need of specific subject matters and the filmmakers' subjectivity. A close probing of the chosen two films for the present study all testify to the validity of such a proposition. Yet both the contemporary films this study has brought under microscope present a substantial socio-historical document – a document which conjures up a socio-historical microcosm by peeping into the cinematic image of woman as a mere spectacle or an object of dominant cultural discourse or even a victim of the identity politics inherent in the stereotyping of women's image in a predominantly patriarchal set up which makes it mandatory for her to be a perfect combination of certain typical traits and

idiosyncrasies used in an oft-repeated pattern of mythical iconography. It is a world where the politics of caste, class, religion, gender, economic identity decides virtually everything. The world the women live in is therefore basically a world of shattered dreams, thwarted hopes, tainted identity and morbid existences, and, of course, at times a world of a flipper of hope. Both the films unveil before the discerning connoisseurs the familiar world of Indian women – a world that relegates woman to a marginalized entity, a world marked by acute gender bias. It is a male world, the callousness of which often shatters and thwarts the dreams and aspirations of female folk, but it is where they are fated to persist or perish.

The historiographers as well as well as a large section of historians across the globe have been relentlessly probing into cinema as a potent source of history. No doubt, the past is brought to life in cinema. But it is only a mediated past in most of the cases. The same, of course, holds good to written history to a great extent as well. The past, or for that matter present in cinema is enlivened through the choice of specific themes, the tastes of an era, production necessities, the strength of creative writing, the creator's subjectivity and the depiction of dominant cultural and political ideologies. This is the sign post the present study follows to explore and construe historical reality of the films and not exactly the so called literal representation of the past or present. This feature of cinema tangibly leads to certain documents of reality. Fiction can critique and analyse the way past epochs functioned economically and can study their dominant psyche. Thus it is hard, for example, to conceive of a more authentic testament to the economic and social status of urban Indian women in contemporary India than the myriad sequences of the films like Madhur

Bhandarkar's 'Page 3' and Manju Bora's 'Akashi Torar Kothare'. The subdued image of women as a pliant subordinate to her male counterpart, her economic uncertainty, the rituals, customs and conventions to clamp her freedom of choice, the multiple atrocity of patriarchy all constitute an extraordinary bit of social history. As 'source' of history, film is often ignored by academic historians. Yet both the films taken for this study not only reveal a great deal about the external aspects of a historical moment, but also indicate more than 'official' historical documents do about ideological trends or social attitudes and beliefs. While historians, historiographers, film scholars and researchers all over the world are marveling over the myriad potentialities of cinema as a source of history as well as the ever contentious issues associated with such an approach, the scenario here in India, which is officially the world's largest film producing country, seems to be a pretty dismal one in terms of substantial

research endeavours and here consists in the utility and essence of the present study.

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Dr. Pranjal Borah is an Associate Professor, Dept of English, Dikhowmukh College, Sivasagar. He is also serving as the Guest Faculty in Film Studies at Dibrugarh University, North Lakhimpur College, and Jagannath Barooah College. He is based in Jorhat, Assam.