

Findings and Conclusions

A total of ten female protagonists were analyzed in ten selected films from a time period covering 50 years that is from 1950 to 2000. These were Anita from *Mr. & Mrs. 55* (1955), Radha from *Mother India* (1957), Chhoti Bahu from *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam* (1962), Rosie from *Guide* (1965), Uma from *Abhimaan* (1972), Julie from *Julie* (1975), Manorama from *Prem Rog* (1982), Kiran from *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988), Damini from *Damini* (1993) and Nandini from *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999).

Anita is the modern woman from *Mr. & Mrs. 55* (1955), who loved to wear non-traditional dresses. Her character is placed in an urban setting and she is a confidant woman who can speak her mind. In *Mr. & Mrs. 55*, we see the noted auteur Guru Dutt define the idolized and perfect wife for the audience in the form of Preetam's sister-in-law. She spends her time from dawn to dusk in household chores. She bears children, as children and fecundity are important for her as a woman, and does not complain if her husband physically assaults her, after all he loves her too, and her life centers around her husband and children. This perfect wife has been created as a role model for Anita. Anita's character has been created to define the undesirable wife – she wears shorts, goes outside to watch tennis match, has a male friend and is under the influence of a man-hating aunt. Anita is impressed by the wife defined by the film and immediately affirms her love for Preetam. She is also ready to lose her past identity and become the wife as desired by the filmmaker. The defining characteristic of Anita in *Mr. & Mrs. 55* is that of an undesirable wife who becomes desirable as defined by the filmmakers.

The character of Radha from *Mother India* (1957) is primarily defined as a mother, not only of her children but of the ‘entire nation’. Radha’s role as that of a mother is infused with characteristics that will almost become cliché in the future films depicting mothers. She is of a sacrificing and altruistic nature, a perfect image of anguished motherhood. Her trials and tribulations have been glorified and exalted. The countless sacrifices resulted in the title, *Mother India*. Radha represents motherhood as defined by a nation. She has the resilience to suffer continuously but also has the ability to be a feminine punisher, who will not shy away from killing her own son. Radha, like the other wives in this study and in Hindi cinema, is attired and

characterized as a wife defined by Bollywood. The defining characteristic of Radha in *Mother India* is that of a suffering mother whose suffering is glorified and exalted. She embodies the nation-as-mother concept in Indian tradition.

Chhoti Bahu in *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam* (1962) is punished with death for an imagined transgression, though her killers suffer too in the film. Her ordeal ending with death has been glorified and exalted. She spends her life fighting for the attention of his debauched husband. The film's songs and semiotics celebrate the character of a suffering and rejected wife. While the film can also be interpreted as a critique of a feudal-patriarchal system, it is the image of Chhoti Bahu's life as a forever-longing wife that remains the defining feature of the film. The suffering and the pain is interpreted as positive, when Chhoti Bahu, in the end calls herself as *Sati Savitri*. Chhoti Bahu's identity as a married woman has been highlighted by fetishizing the markers or symbols of marriage, from vermillion to the *bindi*. The defining identity of Chhoti Bahu is her *Pativrata* (virtuous wife) nature. She carries this identity proudly and tragically. The defining characteristic of Chhoti Bahu in *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam* is that of a suffering wife, whose death is celebrated by evoking the tradition of *Sati*.

Rosie is different from the women characters analyzed in this study. Her proclamation to Marco, her impotent husband, that '*Marco Main Jeena Chahti Hoon*' (Marco I want to live!) makes her a rare kind of wife in Hindi cinema. From the point of view of Hindi cinema, she transgresses, when she leaves her husband to live with her lover. She is neither punished nor made to feel guilty about this, though there are several minor attempts to do so. She even resists and raises a protest when her lover tries to economically exploit her. Rosie as a woman character in Hindi film, has a voice, not a symbolic voice with no effect, but a real voice, which she uses to chart her own destiny. Rosie is not ashamed of her *devdasi* past. She embraces her past as a dancing girl and uses it for her own economic advantage. One of the central theme of the movie is the economic independence of a woman, the more a woman is free in economic terms, the less she is dependent on men for life and sustenance. Though in the end, a song labels her as *bewafa* (unfaithful) and she does repent in front of Raju and realizes the importance of him. The repentance is not one-sided. Raju, too, accepts that he became materialistic and greedy. What explains Rosie's different nature and character? One of the reasons is that the character of Rosie was not written for the screen, but was adapted from a novel written by a celebrated Indian author, R.

K. Narayan. The author is also behind the creation of the charming town of Malgudi and the real, ordinary people that populated the fictional town. Originally, Rosie was the creation of a celebrated and noted author R. K. Narayan, then she was transcribed on the screen. That Rosie did not come out of the pen of a Bollywood screen writer or a director perhaps freed her from the stereotyping and unnecessary melodrama. The defining characteristic of Rosie in Guide is that of an independent woman who has the ability to chart her own destiny, though she was dependent on a man for her success, she does not become a martyr.

Uma's character in *Abhimaan* (1972) has been painted with soft hues. She is quite, demure and religious. She sports a *bindi* and vermillion, and dresses up in sober *saris*. Her real role in the film is of a working woman in an Indian family. Though the film begins with the breaking of a stereotype, a wife being more talented than a husband, *Abhimaan* ultimately defines and reduces Uma in terms of motherhood. Uma's miscarriage and her yearning for a child are her defining characteristics in the movie. The movie does not offer a tangible solution for the domestic problems arising out of tensions between a working couple. The solution provided is typically melodramatic and impractical to the point of being absurd. Though the film chastises the haughty male personified by Amitabh Bachchan, the reprimand is quite light and the film immediately moves the focus on Uma's pain due to the loss of a child. Another defining feature of Uma in the film is her non-complaining nature. She, like the typical wives of Hindi cinema, quietly accepts her husband's haughtiness and harshness. She is even willing to sacrifice her career, once again the image of altruistic-sacrificing image of a wife is evoked. The defining characteristic of Uma in *Abhimaan* is that of a silent and obedient wife. Her aspiration for motherhood has been portrayed as her one and only feature.

Julie (1975) tries to address the social issue of unwed motherhood. While the film accepts Julie and her child in typical melodramatic Bollywood fashion, it does so at a price. The price is unrivalled stereotyping of Julie as a Christian Anglo-Indian woman. Another defining feature of Julie is the sexual objectification of her character. The film defines Julie as an object of desire and makes sure that the audience interprets Julie as a woman who deserves what was in store, that is her pregnancy arising out of premarital sex. While Anglo-Indians in general and Christians in particular are almost absent from the mainstream Hindi cinema, the roles they have

been assigned over a period of time are mere stereotypes. Why did the director choose Julie, a Christian, for the role? Perhaps the answer lies in the belief that as a Christian with perceived lifestyle Julie would be amenable for a role demanding premarital sex. The defining characteristic of Julie in *Julie* is that of an independent woman who suffers due to her sexual choice.

Manorama in *Prem Rog* starts off as a young and vivacious girl full of verve and vitality. Her transformation as a subdued and quite widow after the death of her husband is absolute. Manorama not only becomes religious during her widowhood, she also quietly accepts all the humiliating and orthodox traditions forced on her. Her emancipation ultimately comes at the hand of a man, Devdhar. An educated and egalitarian outsider comes to the rescue of an exploited Manorama. Though the film captures the horrors of the plight of a widow in India, we do not see any protest from Manorama, nor does she question the orthodox beliefs and practices. The sole rebellion to the regressive practices of widowhood comes from Devdhar. The defining characteristic of Manorama in *Prem Rog* is that of a suffering widow who accepts all the trials and tribulations without complaining.

Kiran in *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988) is a rape survivor who becomes a female-avenger and castrates her rapists. While the solution provided for the problem of rape is a bit utopian and crass, Kiran is able to portray the trauma of a rape victim with grace. Before Kiran makes the decision of becoming a vigilante, she has dealt with the shame rape survivors are subjected to in Indian society. We see her speaking in terms of ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’, terms long associated with rape victims in Indian culture. Kiran, a woman and an educated police officer, is unable to disassociate herself with Indian patriarchal definitions of ‘purity’ of a woman. Kiran’s validation comes at the hand of a man, once again a woman has been rescued by a man in a Hindi film. The film also uses religious motifs to explain the stigma related to rape. Religion is also evoked and used as a source of fighting evil. The defining characteristic of Kiran in *Zakhmi Aurat* is that of a rape survivor who avenges her rape.

Damini in *Damini* (1993) is a crusader of justice. Once again, the issue of rape is evoked, but this time a woman other than the victim is fighting for justice. While Damini obtains support from a male lawyer in the fight against the corrupt system, she has great empathy with the rape victim. As a woman, she relates to the victim and

imagines herself in the place of the victim. Damini has been portrayed as an upright and truthful woman. It is shown that these qualities assist her fight the long battle of justice. The director resorts to mythical symbology and imagines Damini as a vengeful goddess in the form of *Drugha*, who will annihilate her enemies. The defining characteristic of Damini in the film is that of an upright and honest woman who fights for justice.

Nandini in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999) initially takes a sharp departure from the wives of Hindi cinema, she has the guts to challenge the holiness and veracity of *mangalsutra* itself. She is unwilling to accept her husband. She complains and repeatedly refuses exhortations to accept her husband. The woman in Nandini has been given a voice and originality. All this changes in the end, when the sanctity of the *mangalsutra* and marriage is upheld once again. Without any plausible explanations, she leaves her lover for the husband. The defining characteristic of Nandini is that of a rebellious wife who ultimately gives up her rebellion, and returns to her marriage.

It is slightly difficult to trace the evolution of women characters in the selected films from 1950 to 2000, since they do not follow a set pattern. However, a rough layout of the evolution of women in these films can be sketched. During 1950 to 1960, the characterization of women was regressive and had strong stamp of patriarchal influence. In the decade of 1960--1970, in one of the films (*Sahab Biwi Aur Ghulam*) once again a woman suffers silently and is defined in terms of a woman defined in religion. The exception during this decade is Rosie, however. In the time of 1970 to 1980, the characterization of women as servile beings continues. A bit of an exception is Julie who makes her own sexual decisions, but that decision of hers is shown as a mistake, for which she suffers. During 1980 to 1990, two diametrically opposite characters emerge. Manorama, like her predecessors, is willing to suffer and Kiran is ready to take action and chart her future. Lastly, in 1990--2000, two slightly different types of women emerge. Damini is shown as a crusader of justice who has the ability to take initiative. On the contrary, Nandini is a rebellious wife, but her rebelliousness is cut short due to the strong influence of religion on the film. Her character has been used to justify the power of a religious artefact (*mangalsutra*). Several changes could be discerned in the portrayal of women from 1950 to 2000. From 1960s onwards, women protagonists became more vocal about their desires and

aspirations and could voice their concerns. Specifically, in 1980s and in the 1990s, women characters tried to chart their own destiny, but complete independence in actions was absent. Women continued to be dependent on men. Every decade bears the strong imprint of patriarchal influence on the construction of female characters, without exception.

Except Julie, none of the characters were explicitly sexually objectified. It is pertinent to note that Julie was a story of pre-marital sex. She engaged in consensual sex with her male partner and is shown to suffer for the act. She is ostracized for her act and has to bear the burden alone. The male partner is untouched by the suffering. Julie's character has been presented in a manner in which she appears to be open to the idea of pre-marital sex. A variety of ways are used to achieve this, for example her clothes in the film and her friendship with males.

Except Rosie from *Guide* and Damini from *Damini*, none of the women characters can act as role models for women in Indian society. Seemingly strong women characters such as Julie, Kiran and Nandini either depend on their male counterparts for validation or are helped by males in their journey. The impact of the feminine deities is too strong on their characters. A religious artefact or a book or a deity has persistently been used as a reference point to define them. Moreover, they do not represent religion or a deity in its full complexity and dynamics. Only those aspects of religion have been used that satisfy a male imagination of women. In other words, their portrayal depicts the appropriation of a woman's image defined in religion by men.

The dominant image of womanhood that is depicted in the selected films is that of a suffering woman. Radha from *Mother India*, Chhoti Bahu from *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam*, Uma from *Abhimaan*, Julie from *Julie*, Manorama from *Prem Rog*, Damini from *Damini* and Nandini from *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, all these characters suffer due to one or the other reason. Damini is a minor exception, though she suffers the price of being truthful. All these women characters can be seen crying or suffering throughout the length of the movie.

Popular Hindi cinema is not quite known for raising social issues. Often, social issues are mixed with the melodramatic nature of the film. The distinctive nature of Hindi cinema that puts emphasis on songs, spectacle and pomp somewhat

shadows the social issues being raised. In the selected films, however, several social issues could be discerned. In *Mother India* (1957), the trials and tribulations of a single mother are focused upon. The woman in this case, according to the film, should remain steadfast and morally upright and bear all the problems and hardships with grace and without complaining. In *Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam* (1962), the role of a wife and a woman in a feudal family is commented upon. While the males in the family were heavily criticized and the film itself is a scathing critique of a feudal mindset, the women in the film were not supposed to rebel or voice their concerns. Constant devotion of the uncaring husband was the only option left to them. *Guide* (1965) raises the issue of a wife unhappy with her marriage. The solution provided in the film is simple. A woman must walk away from such a marriage. *Abhimaan* (1972) questions the role of a working woman in the society and in the family. The film does not provide any solution to the problems that might arise due to the clash between a working couple. *Julie* (1975) raises the taboo topic of premarital sex and pregnancy in Indian society. The film provides, for one more time, a simple solution for the issue. Such women must be accepted by the society. *Prem Rog* (1982) raises the pertinent issue of the plight of widows in the Indian society and the historic and religious issue of widow re-marriage in India. The film provides a straightforward answer. Widows must be allowed to remarry. *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988) provides an impractical and melodramatic answer to the issue of rape in India – surgical castration of the rapists. However, acceptance of the rape survivors was a theme that was highlighted in the movie. *Damini* (1993) is a harsh critique of the judicial system, society and the media in relation to provide justice to rape survivors. The film provides a logical and legal answer to the problem of rape. *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999) once again raised the issue of wife unhappy with her marriage. The film proffers no concrete answer and ultimately upholds the sanctity of the marriage.

This work concludes by quoting two icons of Hindi cinema: Hema Malini and Javed Akhtar. Hema Malini, a super star of Bollywood, is one of the most recognizable faces of Hindi cinema. She has done myriad of roles, and has acted in over 100 films. Starting from 1961, her career spanned nearly half a century. About the portrayal of women in Hindi films through her personal experience, she says:

so many roles, so many trends, so many kinds of cinema and so many stories...I have projected different images during different

decades, voiced different concerns-sometimes as a daughter, sometimes as a wife and mother- but often I ask myself if things have really changed. I'm not sure. (Somayya et al., p. 100)

Javed Akhtar, an eminent lyricist and a formidable scriptwriter of Hindi cinema, agrees that the portrayal of women needs a change. He asserts that “everyone in the film industry knows the image of the Indian woman is to change, but as to what the new image is going to be there is complete confusion (Virdi, 2003).