

**Portrayal Of Women In The Films Of Rituparno Ghosh And Shyam
Benegal: A Comparative Analysis**

Sudeshna Das¹ & Manjitha Roy²

Abstract

This paper examines the *Portrayal of women in the films of Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal*. Since more number of research studies were not available particularly on these two directors so papers loosely related to the topic portrayal of women are analysed for the review of literature for the thesis. This paper gives an overview of the works of these two great directors and the alternative way that they have portrayed their women characters, from the other directors of their era. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in this paper. For quantitative method content analysis of selected films were done and for qualitative method focus group discussion has been done. A content analysis of five selected films of each of the directors was done. The films were analysed based on certain pre-defined parameters that goes well with the research, and the results are coded on coding sheets and also presented graphically. A focus group discussion was conducted with media and communications students of REVA University, after screening a film of each of these two directors so that they can get an idea about their works and analyse it.

After all the analysis it was found that in the films of Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal there is no stereotypical portrayal of women, and there are varieties of shades in their roles, and the female characters are shown to be more powerful than the male ones. The comparison that can be drawn in their films is that they belong to two different time period so we get to see a difference in culture, plot and the mental set up of the characters.

Key words: *Portrayal, stereotype, comparison*

¹Asst Prof (Media Studies), School of Arts and Humanities, REVA University, Bengaluru, Karnataka
Email: sudeshnadas@reva.edu.in

²Program Specilaist, Amazon India, Bengaluru, Karnataka

Introduction

Cinema has always been a reflection of the ethos and ideology of any society at a given point of time. The mediums to stress on this reflection varied from costumes to music to items of luxury; but the most crucial medium became the characters. The mind-set, thinking, apprehensions or the prejudices of the characters were the same as those of the general public. And this same thing also goes with the portrayal of the women characters in the cinema. In India films are the most popular form of mass communication and Bollywood has the biggest film industry in the world, producing over nine hundred films annually and attracting over fifteen million viewers daily. Indeed, the Bombay film is alleged to be “the opium of the Indian masses” (Gokulsing & Dissanayake,1998) and certainly popular Hindi cinema purports to be nothing more than pure entertainment, enjoyed for the lavish spectacles of dance and song, action packed adventures and glamorous actresses.

For long time Indian film industry was male-dominated. The themes that were presented in the movies were mostly from the point of view of a male audience and women were considered a secondary actor compared to the male. Movies like *Damini* or *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* shows how an innocent woman suffers and becomes a victim of the male-dominated society who simply uses them as puppets. In both the cases the male character is portrayed as docile or impotent who can't do anything to revive their situation. In most of the movies strong patriarchal values have been institutionalized as it would meet the taste of the audience and it would be declared as a “blockbuster hit.” Movies like *Dahej*(1950), *Gauri*(1968), *Devi*(1970), *Biwi Ho To Aisi*(1988), *Pati Parameshwar*(1988) have depicted the women character as the perfect docile housewives which suits the Indian tradition and culture. Audiences have seen to only praise the beauty of the women but have hardly seen accepting women in bold and independent roles.

But film makers like *Bimal Roy*, *Satyajit Ray*, *Guru Dutt*, *Mehboob Khan*, *Rituparno Ghosh*, *Shyam Benegal* and few others have marked an exception with their brilliant presentation of woman excelling beyond their roles as wives, mothers or beloveds. They have tried to portray their female figures as *new woman or bold woman*. These film makers have depicted the women characters that exist in reality and to which we can relate ourselves.

Rationale

This project will give a view on the versatile role of the women characters in the films of Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal, which will pave the way for the other directors to get

inspired from them and follow their works. Their films are devoid of the glitz and glamour normally present in most Indian films, and are more bent on exploring real and true issues.

Problem Statement:

In most of the films we see the stereotypical portrayal of women which caters only to the traditional or cultural values of India. Very few directors like Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal have actually given a new definition to the female characters of their films who are a slice of the real life. This project focuses on how differently these two directors have portrayed their female protagonists and a comparative analysis of the same

Objectives of the study are:

- To analyse the portrayal of women in Indian Cinema.
- To evaluate how women are alternatively portrayed in the films of Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal based on the era and culture that they belong and the role that they have played.
- To do a comparative analysis of the films of Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal.

Review Of Literature

Feminist film theory- Feminism is a social movement that has had an enormous impact on film theory and criticism. Cinema is taken by feminists to be a cultural practice representing myths about women and femininity, and men and masculinity. Issues of representation and spectatorship are central to feminist film theory and criticism. (Smelik, 1998). Claire Johnston was among the first feminist critics to offer a sustained critique of stereotypes from a semiotic point of view. The early work of Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell on representation of women in film had actually helped to make depictions of women more real in narratives as well as documentary cinema.

The concept of 'Male Gaze'- Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" gives the conception of the passive role of women in cinema. In this essay she also talks about the "male gaze" which is predominant in many Hollywood as well as Indian movies.

The concept of Counter-Cinema- Claire Johnston in her 1973 essay, *Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema* said that female images in films actually do not reflect woman's reality at all, but they are portrayed in that form to satisfy the male desires. She uses this concept of myth to describe how sexist ideology is transformed and transmitted in classical film.

Women in Rituparno Ghosh's films- “Alison Macdonald's research paper, ‘Real’ and ‘Imagined’ Women: A Feminist Reading of Rituparno Ghosh's Films” tells us how Rituparno Ghosh had portrayed the bold woman in his films in relation to a more general portrayal of women in Indian commercial and art house movies. While analysing the portrayal of women in Rituparno Ghosh's films Alison Macdonald has emphasized on the female body and feminine identity which are of prime concern in the Hindu religion and cultural tradition.

Women in Shyam Benegal's films- In the research paper, “Portrayal of Women in Shyam Benegal's films”, Deepayan Biswas, had tried to show in which way Shyam Benegal's films show a different image of the woman which is more convincing and sensitive, and deviated from the stereotypical portrayal. He feels that Shyam Benegal's films though falling within the Bollywood genre, are devoid of the ‘superficial glitz and glamour’ normally associated with any other Bollywood mainstream cinema.

The Bechdel Test- The Bechdel test is normally used to identify gender bias in films. This test is named after the American Cartoonist, Alison Bechdel, and it was actually introduced in her comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* in 1985.

The Bechdel Test asks:

- Are there two or more women in the movie with names?
- Do they talk to each other?
- Do they talk about something other than a man?

If a film can answer ‘yes’ to all three questions then it passes the Bechdel Test, even if it is only one scene that passes.

Methodology

Study design: The study design used for this paper is both qualitative and quantitative method. The qualitative method used in this project is *focus group discussion*. The quantitative method used in this project is *content analysis*.

Sampling technique: The sampling technique used in this paper is purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling means deliberate selection of sample units that conform to some pre-determined criteria.

Sample size: A content analysis is done on the five selected films of Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal.

Rituparno Ghosh's-Bariwali, Dahan, Unishe April, Chokher Bali, Subho Muhurat

Shyam Benegal's-Bhoomika, Sardari Begum, Hari Bhari, Ankur, Nishant as per the requirement of the paper.

Data Collection Procedure: Primary data for the paper is collected through

- Content Analysis of selected films of each of the director
- Focus group discussion:

For the focus group discussion *Unishe April* of Rituparno Ghosh and *Ankur* of Shyam Benegal is screened and discussion is done on these two films. Secondary data is collected through books, journals and research papers.

Finding And Analysis

Content Analysis of selected films:

Table 1: Living style of the women characters

Name of the films	Married	Single	Engaged/ live-in relationship	Widow	Not Mention	Total
Ankur	3				1	4
Nishant	2					2
Bhoomika	3			1	1	5
Sardari Begum	2	2				4
Hari Bhari	3	1		1		5
Unishe April			1	1	1	3
Dahan	4		2	1		7
Bariwali		2			1	3
Chokher Bali	1			3		4
Subho Muhurat	4	1			1	6

Graph 1: Living style of the women characters

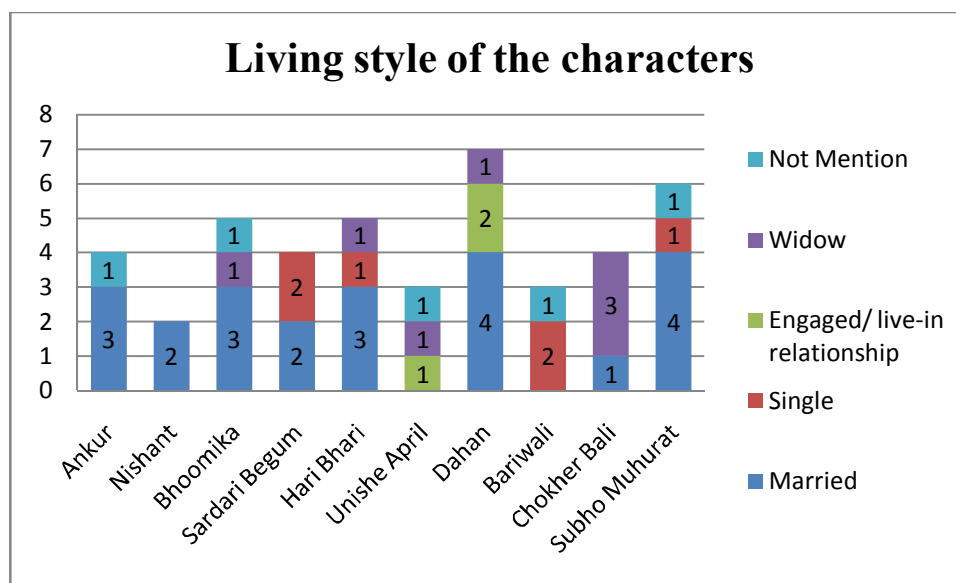


Table 1 shows the living style of the women characters in the films.

In Ankur, Lakshmi, Saru, Rajamma are married women. But for Kaushalya it is not clear whether she is married to Surya's father or not.

In Nishant, both Susheela and Rukmini are married.

In Bhoomika, Usha, her daughter and the first wife of Kale are married. Usha's mother is a widow and it is not clear for Usha's grandmother whether she is married or a widow.

In Sardari Begum, Sardari and Hemraj's wife are married and Sakina and Tehzeeb are single, though Tehzeeb is engaged to a person in her office.

In Hari Bhari, Gazala and her two sister-in-laws are married, and her mother is a widow and one of Gazala's sister is single.

In Unishe April, Sarojini is a widow though we do not understand it from her features. Adithi is engaged to a person whom she had proposed to marry and the living style of Bela is not mentioned, though from her attire it looks like she is a widow.

In Bariwali, Bonolata and her paid help Maloti are single and the living style of Sudeshna is not mentioned in the film, only it is told that she had an affair with the director in the past.

In Chokher Bali, except for Ashalata the other three characters are widow.

In Subho Muhurat, the living style of Rangapishi is not mentioned, Mallika is a single and the other characters are married.

Table 2 : Personality of the women characters

Name of the films	Educated	Decision Making	Career oriented	Religious	Conservative	Not mention	Total
Ankur		1			1	2	4
Nishant				1		1	2
Bhoomika	1		2	1		1	5
Sardari Begum	1		2		1		4
Hari Bhari				3		2	5
Unishe April	1		1			1	3
Dahan	2		1	1	2	1	7
Bariwali	1		1			1	3
Chokher Bali	1			2	1		4
Subho Muhurat	1	1	1		1	2	6

Graph 2 : Personality of the women characters

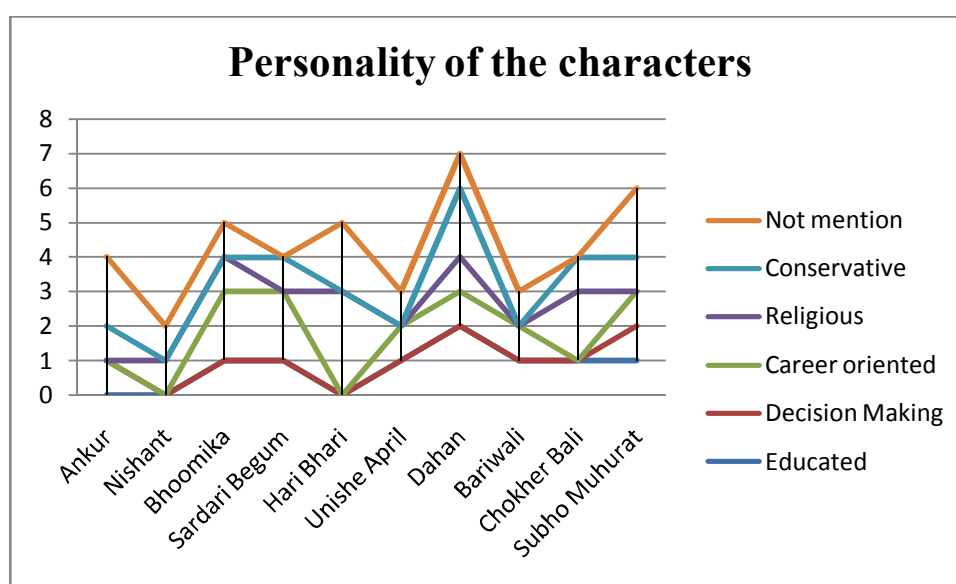


Table 2 shows the personality of the women characters in the film.

In Ankur Laxmi is the decision maker of the house, and Saru is very conservative. The personality of the other two characters are not mentioned.

In Nishant, Rukmini is very religious and the personality of Susheela is not mentioned clearly.

In Bhumika, Usha and her grandmother are career oriented, her daughter is educated, her mother is religious in nature and the personality of Kale's wife is not known.

In Sardari Begum, Sardari and her daughter are career oriented, Tehzeeb is educated and also career oriented and the wife of Hemraj is conservative.

In Hari Bhari most of the characters are religious in nature.

In Unishe April, Adithi is educated, Sarojini is career oriented and the personality of Bela is not known.

In Dahan, few of the characters are educated, most of them are conservative and only Srobona is career oriented.

In Bariwali, Bonolata is educated, Sudeshna is career oriented and the personality of Maloti is not mentioned.

In Chokher Bali, only Binodini is educated but the others are religious and conservative.

In Subho Muhurat all types of characters are present.

Major Findings Of Content Analysis

- Most of the female characters of the selected films are not stereotyped and they present somewhat different picture of a woman. They normally present a woman whom we can relate, and they are one among us, like Sarojini in *Unishe April*.
- The women characters are not given only conventional roles as normally given in the mainstream cinema. There are a variety of shades of women character present in the films, ranging from a religious housewife to an unconventional Hindu widow, and again can be a beautiful cinestart to a budding journalist.
- The female figures normally dress in a traditional attire but few of them also dress in non-traditional attires. The directors have designed the costumes very consciously so that it portrays the inner-self of the character.
- The women playing the leading roles in the films normally do not follow the patriarchal norms. Most of the films have the women in the leading roles and the character of the men are dependent on the women and can be considered as supporting characters, as the script goes further with the women.

- Most of the women characters of the selected films are either educated or career oriented. Some of them are religious, and very few of them are decision makers. Most of the films of Shyam Benegal depicts women within the household and not a working women, which is because of the era that he belong to.
- Most of the women characters are married. Few are single and widows, and very few are engaged.
- Most of the women characters in the films belong to the middle class. Only a few belong to the lower and upper class. Both of these directors, specially Rituparno Ghosh made films with middle-class people and their mentality.
- The presence of feudal structure is not there in the selected film of Rituparno Ghosh, and is present only in two of the selected films of Shyam Benegal, because when he started making films still the feudal structure used to exist in Indian society.
- If a comparison is drawn between the films of these two directors then the difference that we get is only the time period. In that sense we can say that Shyam Benegal had made more bold films about women in context with the time period that he made it.

Focus Group Discussion Analysis:

From the focus group discussion the following things are analysed:

- Most of the people in the focus group discussion have said that they like the character Lakshmi from the movie Ankur because she is extremely bold, and though she have committed a mistake out of temptation, still she has the sense of guilty at the end. From the film Unishe April most of them like the character Sarojini, because she gives a feeling of a new woman, and though she is portrayed a negative character in the beginning but still she appears out to be something different at the end. And she is not portrayed as the conventional loving mother but rather a hard working mother. Only one of the participants have said that she likes the character Adithi from Unishe April because of her rebelling nature.
- When asked about their views on stereotypical portrayal of women in Indian cinema most of the participants have agreed that there is a presence of stereotypical portrayal in the early cinemas but now we do not see much of the stereotypes. Mention of few films were made like NH 10 , Margarita With a Straw, Maardani, Kaahani, etc.

Even the two films on which the discussion had taken place there is no stereotypical portrayal of the women characters.

- When the works of Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal have been told to compare with the other directors of their era, then most of the participants have said that they had brought about a change in the portrayal of women in Indian cinema, have worked on different themes which were never thought about, and explored with different roles for their characters. They have repeatedly mentioned the concept of new and bold women in their films.
- In the context of the two films for the discussion, the work and the marriage life of the female characters for the film *Ankur* follow the Indian culture and tradition. But for the film *Unish April* since Sarojini is a dancer so it always do not go right with the conventional Indian society, and this was clearly mentioned in the film. This also shows that the character is not culture bound.
- Most of the participants have agreed to the fact that the female characters in these two films enjoy equal social freedom as their male counterparts does. They are not dependent on the male characters for their livelihood. Most of the female characters in the two films are liberal minded and are decision makers.
- These two films are relevant today and can be compared with films like *Maardani* and *NH 10*. Though these two films were made long time ago but still the sharpness and boldness of the characters are something that is the striking feature of these films.

Conclusion

Portrayal of women in Indian cinema is constantly changing with the change of time. Since India produces largest number of films every year, in different languages so we see different shades of the portrayal of women in Indian cinema.

From the findings of this project it can be seen that the stereotypes in the portrayal of women are mostly generated by the mainstream cinema. The film makers of parallel cinema have always given more importance to their female characters. This can be judged well from the above analysis. The tension between portraying women as modern and yet traditional enough to conform to the social psyche is an interesting phenomenon. Middle class ideologies of women's roles as wives and mothers provide the underlying basis for most programs. In a country where 36 percent of the agricultural workforce is female, women continue to be projected as predominantly non-producers and as playing a limited role outside the home.

Women are basically seen as performing a decorative function and as being marginal to national growth and development. Their primary place is seen as being within the home and this value is reflected in the content and setting of most television programs. The plural nature of Indian culture and the diverse roles that women play is neither acknowledged nor communicated. This results in a reinforcing of the stereotyped images and roles specifications of women in a uni-dimensional projection of their reality.

From the content analysis of the selected films done in this project, it is seen that in most of the films of Rituparno Ghosh and Shyam Benegal the women characters are portrayed alternatively, they do not go by the actual societal norms and traditional values, but deal with the intricate emotions of the characters, and their social standing, so that they become life like in front of the audiences.

Both of these directors have worked with themes from our everyday life, and given it a new definition. Their main priority was never the commercial success in industry, but to reach out to their target audience and leave behind a social message in their films. The films of these directors that have been chosen as samples for content analysis, give us a picture of the vibrant roles of women in their films.

Projects like this are thought to be a criticism from the feminist perspective about the film industry in India, but it actually attempts to do away with the stereotypical portrayal of women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- (n.d.). Retrieved from sahapedia.org/interview-with-moinak-biswas-on-rituparno-ghosh/.
- (n.d.). Retrieved from media2.indiatoday.in/indiatoday/simply-celebrate-september-2011-rituparno-ghosh.pdf.
- (n.d.). Retrieved from wonderwoman.indiatoday.in/photo/rituparno-ghosh-and-his-love-for-woman/1/3370.html#photo.
- Agarwal, R. (n.d.). Changing Roles of Women in Indian Cinema.
- Banaji, S. (2007). Slippery Subjects: Gender, meaning and the Bollywood audience. In *Companion to Gender and Media* (pp. 493-502). Routledge.
- Bannerjee, D. (n.d.). *Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture and Spaces*.

- Biswas, D. (n.d.). *Antiessays.com*. Retrieved from [www.antiessays.com/free-essays/Portrayal of women in Shyam Benegal-S-43920/.html](http://www.antiessays.com/free-essays/Portrayal-of-women-in-Shyam-Benegal-S-43920/.html).
- Biswas, D. (n.d.). Portrayal of Women in Shyam Benegal's Films.
- Brewer, C. (n.d.). The Sterotypical Portrayal of Women in Slasher films: Then versus Now. 20-23.
- Butalia, e. b. (1995). Where Women are Worshipped, there the Gods Rejoice: The Mirage of Ancestress of Hindu Women. In *Woman and Hindu Right* (p. 18). New Delhi.
- Datta, S. (2000). Globalisation and Representation of Women in Indian Cinema. *JSTOR*, 71-82.
- Hollinger, K. (2012). *Feminist Film Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnston, C. (1973). Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema.
- Kumar, A. (n.d.). Retrieved from www.thehindu.com/features/friday-reviews/bhumika-1997/article6221624.ece.
- Kundra, S. (2005). *Basic Audio-Visual Media*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt Ltd. .
- Macdonald, A. (n.d.). Retrieved from www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/research/working-papers/032009.pdf.
- Macdonald, A. (n.d.). 'Real' and 'Imagined' Women: A Feminist Reading of Rituparno Ghosh's films.
- Majumdar, M. (n.d.). *A refreshing change in the arid world of Bengali Cinema, particularly for a clash of histrionic skills between Sharmila and Rakhee*. Retrieved from www.outlookindia.com/article/subho-muhurat/219002.
- Mukherjee, S. (n.d.). Feminism in a Calcutta Context: Assault, Appeasement, and Assertion in Rituparno Ghosh's Dahan.
- Mukherjee, S. (n.d.). The Impossibility of Incestuous Love: Woman's captivity and National Liberation in Rituparno Ghosh's Utsab.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.
- Nandakumar, S. (2011, May). Stereotypical Portrayal of Women in Commercial Indian Cinema.
- Needham, A. D. (2013). *New Indian Cinema in Post Independence India: The cultural work of Shyam Benegal's Films*. Routledge.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. a. (n.d.). *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*.

- Ray, A. (n.d.). The Journey of Women in Indian Cinema.
- Salam, Z. U. (n.d.). Retrieved from [www.the hindu.com/features/cinema/nishant-1975 article3965004.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/nishant-1975-article3965004.ece).
- Smelik, A. (1998). Feminist Film Theory. In *The Cinema Book*. London: Macmillan.