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The Evolution of Gender Presentation Through the Romantic Gaze in Films: A Bollywood Case Study

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Abstract:

The Hindi film industry, also referred to as Bollywood, is one of the leading film industries in India, bringing in thousands of crores in revenue each year and shaping the minds of millions of individuals through their messages, both within the country and abroad. Its stars become the biggest entertainers in the country, acting as trendsetters, actively influencing relevant discourses and setting the standards for ideal behaviour through their actions on and off screen. In such a context, Shah Rukh Khan, a popular actor in the industry boasting a career that has lasted over three decades, stands out as someone who has chosen to adhere to particular messages and principles in his films. Despite changing times, writers, directors and societal notions of love, sexuality, and gender dynamics, Shah Rukh Khan has chosen to portray his characters' masculinity and their treatment of women in a very curated manner, one that stands out from his contemporaries. This paper aims to explore how Khan has used non-normative masculinity in order to give life to characters who treat the women, particularly romantic counterparts, with dignity and respect.

Keywords: Shah Rukh Khan, Bollywood, cinema, romance.

Research Objectives:

1. To analyse how Shah Rukh Khan established his image as a romantic icon.
2. To understand how he differs from other actors in the industry with his depictions of masculinity.
3. To understand what impact these roles have on the public.

Research Questions:

1. What makes Shah Rukh Khan stand out from among his contemporaries in the romance genre?
2. How do Shah Rukh Khan's characters treat women in their respective films?

3. How can the industry improve in order to promote better treatment of women and positive masculinity?

1.0 INTRODUCTION:

The Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, has been a foundational part of providing both entertainment and social messaging to Indians for over a century. It is a highly influential business, one that mints thousands of crores every year, while also making cultural touchstones, be that through the cinema or the stars that form its backbone.

Hindi film stars cultivate a brand of their own, started by their films but fueled by advertisements, endorsements and reality show appearances that cement them in the public eye. They become the trendsetters, the talk of the town and get entire newspaper supplementaries dedicated to their vacations, food habits and luxury purchases.

This stardom brings viewers to theatres more often than reputed directors and writers. The audience wants to watch the next big film which stars their favourite actor, and only after it do they explore the actual creators behind it. In such a context, the films that an actor chooses to participate in, have a greater impact on an audience than particular filmmakers' visions.

Many actors explore different genres and messaging to explore their craft, but some choose a niche and stick to it. Shah Rukh Khan falls somewhere between these two poles, exploring a wide variety of styles and collaborating with a number of directors and writers, but consistently sticking to certain themes.

Regardless of what film he chooses to participate in, Khan has always stuck to particular principles that he rarely deviates from, which sets him apart from both his contemporaries and his successors. Key to these is his characters' treatment of women.

Men in Hindi cinema reflect the many types of men in the real world, from brooding to vulnerable, calm to aggressive, and many actors choose to explore multiple of these men and their actions, including their socially acceptable and unacceptable traits.

Some films choose to critique and explore negative traits, while others remain neutral or even glorify them. Actors like Shahid Kapoor have over the span of their careers gone from characters like Aditya in Imtiaz Ali's *Jab We Met*, an introspective and gentle man, to the titular Kabir Singh from Sandeep Reddy Vanga's Bollywood debut, an aggressive, misogynistic and abusive man.

Khan on the other hand, while starting off with negative roles, evolved into a very particular brand of gentle masculinity, present as early as in 1994 with films like *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa* where he plays Sunil, a young and naive boy who yearns earnestly and decides to give up the woman he loves because she loves someone else.

There is a distinct care in the way Khan's characters approach women that will be explored over the course of this paper. While the focus lies on the romantic counterparts, his gentleness

extends to all women in the films, including friends and family.

2.0 KHAN'S BRAND OF MASCULINITY:

The specific approach he extends to women comes from a very specific type of masculinity Khan cultivates in his characters, which aims to defy the conventional ideas of what it means to be an Indian man in order to foster a kind and vulnerable version of manhood. He cares and protects but not through violence or aggression, not stoic or distant, but through communication, tears, hugs, comfort and words of affirmation.

This translates into characters that are not the pinnacles of masculinity, often being much smaller in stature to his contemporaries and adversaries in the films. Aditya Pancholi towers over Khan in *Yes Boss*, while the leading pair stand at about a similar level.

Khan's characters have also often been unpopular with male audiences because he gets beaten up easily, and despite fighting back, it's not as extravagant or explosive as the action done by someone like Salman Khan, who is often portrayed to be well built and capable of putting up a solid fight. In *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, Khan spends much of the final confrontation struggling before he's able to retaliate appropriately. He, until recently, was rarely a one man army that can take hordes of bad guys out.

It is this masculinity that compounds into creating overall considerate, calm and caring men who treat the people in their lives right. He plays simple men like Surinder from *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi*, working class people with small problems and small joys. When he realises he may be inadequate for his wife, he changes on the surface but remains the simple man he is on the inside.

This representation is not necessarily universal. Over the course of Khan's 32 year spanning career, he has explored a number of genres and roles. In his newer films, particularly those released in 2023, while he still retains his touch of gentleness, he chose to lean into the massy action hero role. There is an attempt to mould these roles to Khan's existing image, but his small stature has gone from a weakness to a strength used to combat his opinions with speed and precision.

Some of his earlier roles also have portrayed many toxic traits associated directly with hegemonic masculinity, as in his debut film *Deewana* where Raja becomes infatuated with a girl and makes it his mission to possess her at all costs, including convincing her mother figure to let him have her despite her wishes.

But these roles stand as a relic of their time when compared to the breadth and depth of Khan's work, especially with roles like Veer from *Veer-Zaara* who watches the woman he loves leave with the man she's engaged to without complaint. He expresses his love to Zaara, admits that he had dreamt of marrying her, and wishes her a happy future with her fiance.

2.0 THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN:

There is a good natured attitude that Khan approaches women with in his films that is

noteworthy. While his treatment of his leading ladies has evolved over the course of his filmography, its presence can be felt as far behind as *Deewana* with the love that he treats his wife's mother with.

This is also present in his treatment of Farida Jalal's character in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, who plays Simran's mother. Khan doesn't hesitate to sit on the floor and help the women out in the kitchen, engaging them in conversation as if it's a commonplace occurrence. This continues into films like *Kal Ho Naa Ho* where Aman is seen happily cooking with Jennifer (Jaya Bachchan), helping her make and serve dinner.

This same gentleness extends to his female counterparts. *DDLJ* marked the turning point from which Khan weaned off playing negative roles and focused on becoming the romantic hero he had established himself as, with the record breaking film.

In it, Raj starts off as rude and immature but evolves into a caring man, one that understands the status of women in a deeply patriarchal context and works to win Simran's (Kajol) hand in marriage without alienating her from it. Running away might have brought them freedom, but it would have unmoored Simran from the only reliable support system she had in a largely conservative society.

After *DDLJ*, his roles really hone in on his soft masculinity and considerate nature with films like *Yes Boss* where Seema (Juhi Chawla) wishes success in her life, either through her own hard work or through marriage, something Rahul never disparages her for. He instead works harder, aiming for his own dreams of success and a future with Seema.

In the 2000s, he properly cemented his role as the heartthrob of the industry with classics like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* where his character leaves his family after falling in love with and marrying a girl of a lower social status who had recently lost her father. He treats Anjali (Kajol) as an equal despite their class difference and fights against his loved ones to be with her and protect her and her younger sister.

This continued into films like *Kal Ho Naa Ho* where Aman gives up on his own love for Naina (Preity Zinta) because of his terminal heart condition and gets her to fall in love with their mutual friend so that she would have someone with her after his passing.

The respect his characters have towards women also means that he's unafraid of being of lesser status than them, for example in a film like *Om Shanti Om* where Om falls in love with Shantipriya (Deepika Padukone), a popular actress while he himself is a junior artist. He is also not in love with her because of her status as he openly admits that he'd love her just the same even if she wasn't a big star.

The biggest example of his respectful treatment of women all around in the decade comes from the Yash Chopra directed and Aditya Chopra written classic *Veer-Zaara*, where Khan plays Veer, an Indian Air Force officer who falls in love with a Pakistani woman after their paths happen

to cross. Over the course of the two days they spend together, he treats her with utmost respect, showing her his country and introducing her to his family, before sending her off to safely get back home.

He is about to confess his feelings as she leaves when he finds out she's engaged to someone already. Veer still chooses to tell Zaara (Preity Zinta) about his dream of marrying her, then wishes her a good life with her fiance and tells her that if she ever needed someone, he would always be there across the border, willing to give his life for her. Here, he doesn't expect Zaara to reciprocate but he still values her and is willing to give up everything, which he does as the film progresses.

A proud military man, he gives up his job in the Air Force in order to save Zaara from a man she doesn't want to marry and later when he fails, gives up 22 years of his life to protect Zaara's life and dignity. To Veer, Zaara's life is so paramount that he refuses to let his lawyer use her name in the case to release him, even if it meant him being locked up for the rest of his life.

The 2010s had Khan explore more genres but the two big romance films from the decade explore this same idea through a more modern lens, incorporating sexuality into the mix as his characters and the topics discussed, matured.

While Yash Chopra's *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* has Samar help Meera (Katrina Kaif) explore herself and her sexuality, Imtiaz Ali's *Jab Harry Met Sejal* gives Khan's squeaky clean romantic image a dark twist while allowing him to both ruminate upon and maintain his respectful ways.

Harry (Shah Rukh Khan) is a beleaguered tour guide and self described womaniser who is forced to journey across Europe with a highly educated but sheltered Sejal (Anushka Sharma) and over the course of the film, rediscovers his relationship with love and sexuality through their friendship and then romance. Through the course of the film, Harry respects Sejal's space and desires, protecting her during times of need. Even his treatment of other women, while can be considered callous, is never shown as aggressive, imposing or outside the bounds of his partners' wishes or explicit consent.

While the 2010s were capped off with a slow decline of Khan's career, the actor returned in full force in 2023, releasing three films back to back, each with material on women's empowerment. *Dunki* in particular uses the romantic gaze in order to show how Khan's characters treat women.

It has Hardy fall in love with Manu (Tapsee Pannu) over the course of the latter's attempt to get a visa to travel to London to earn for her family. When all else fails, Hardy volunteers to take her and her friends on the dangerous donkey route, despite the fact that he himself has no desire to leave. Over the course of the film, he looks after Manu, teaching her wrestling for a visa application and reprimanding others when they laugh at her, but he never condescends to her.

It should be argued that this is not universal, but it is definitely a clear trend. At the beginning of his career, Khan did roles like Raja in *Deewana* or Rahul in *Darr*, volatile and violent men, the

former winning his beloved's hand in marriage against her consent and the latter actively stalking and harassing the woman he loved. There is a theme of love as possession in his early work, but they were quickly weaned off after *DDLJ*, popping up only now and then with roles like Amar in *Dil Se* who actively stalks and violates Moina's (Manisha Koirala) consent or *Devdas* who abandons his lover after the disapproval of his father.

3.0 CONCLUSION:

Over the course of his three plus decade career, Khan has established himself as the 'King' of Bollywood, an image held consistently through not only the popularity of his films and other promotional activities, but also the messages he has chosen to convey through his work. The better treatment of women, particularly romantic counterparts is something his films have championed from almost the very beginning.

In 2023, the same year as the releases of Khan's comeback films, each starring strong women characters that are able to match him as equals, director Sandeep Reddy Vanga released his second Hindi film, the Ranbir Kapoor starrer *Animal*. The film glorifies extreme violence and virulent misogyny, justifying infidelity and the mistreatment of women within its text. The film earned over 900 crores at the global box office, hundreds of crores more than the aforementioned *Kabir Singh*.

The Kapoor's have played his fair share of roles during his career, some toxic and some distinctly less so. They, like many of their contemporaries, have chosen to give priority to the variety of roles they play over the values their characters and films propagate. While this paper is not a condemnation of art with societally questionable or even negative messages, it is definitely an imploration to be more critical of the art one chooses to consume and its possible impacts on minds and discourse.

Discussions on the depiction of women in cinema should not only be restricted to how they act or are framed, because women alone cannot uplift themselves in isolation. The way men behave around them and treat them also plays into shaping a more inclusive and empathetic future that is equitable to all those participating in it.

Khan stands out in this context, as an actor who has chosen to prioritise the upliftment of women and their treatment as his equals through time and filmmakers that have come and gone. Cinema acts as both a mirror to society and something to emulate, and one must be careful what they opt to look at and pay attention to, because it could have far reaching positive or adverse implications.

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