



Research Paper

## The Lurking Patriarchy; A Feminist Reading Of Madhur Bhandarkar's Films Fashion And Calendar Girls

Sruthy Prakash & Alida Joseph

Assistant Professor

Gurudeva Institute of Science and Technology Kottayam

### ABSTRACT

When we think of the most revolutionary films of the Indian film industry and consider, in particular, the terms 'gender' and 'body' in relation to films, the films *Fashion* (2008) and *Calendar Girls* (2015) directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, would definitely run into our minds. This paper is based on these two famous films which shook the film industry with its realistic portrayal of the truths in fashion industry, even with some scenes which are actually based on real life events, and yet with a disclaimer that this film is a work of fiction.

A hidden overshadow of patriarchy is visible in the movie *Fashion*, in which Meghna Mathur (Priyanka Chopra) sets-out behind her passion of being a super model without the consent of her father, and her short time success turns out to be a big failure. The actual and everlasting success comes her way only with her father's consent and support in the second stage. The movie *Calendar Girls*, with its message that the success of a person depends on the individual choices, presents to its audience an array of events where females are forced to be the victims of patriarchy, for their success in life.

Received 05 May, 2022; Revised 17 May, 2022; Accepted 19 May, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

### I. INTRODUCTION

How can a film become a revolutionary film? According to the Oxford Dictionary, it can be through involving or causing a complete or dramatic change. If so, what is the change brought up in the films *Fashion* and *Calendar Girls* directed by Madhur Bhandarkar? To answer this question we must consider, the existing trend of films in the place and period where these films were released, and the change that was brought about in these films from the existing order.

As per what the Wikipedia says about Bhandarkar: "In most of his films, Bhandarkar's protagonist are females". This happens at the same time when a recent analysis of Bollywood movies by IBM and two Delhi-based institutions, aiming to extract existing gender stereotypes and biases from Wikipedia Bollywood movie data containing 4000 movies (11 Oct 2017), reveal that: "We observed that while analyzing occupations for males and females, higher level roles are designated to males while lower level roles are designated to females. A similar trend has been exhibited for centrality where females were less central in the plot vs. their male counterparts". This contradiction is what make the films of Bhandarkar, especially *Fashion* and *Calendar Girls*, revolutionary.

Another study, *Feminist Stance in the Movies of Madhur Bhandarkar*, states that: "Women have played a central role in all of his (Madhur Bhandarkar) movies and he has given a new direction and has brought out a drastic change in the characterization of women" (Mishra134).

*Fashion* and *Calendar Girls* in particular, are films where the central characters are females and the films mostly revolve around their lives and experiences. Still, when we see these movies on screen and look deeper into the effects of these movies, we may find some traces of patriarchy and undercurrent against body exposure in them, which might make us, the viewers, a bit disappointed. This study is intended to point out some of such traces.

## II. A FEMINIST READING OF FASHION

In the film *Fashion* the influence of patriarchy in the lives of Meghna Mathur (Priyanka Chopra) and Shonali Gujral (Kangana Ranaut) is of much prominence to discuss along with the same experienced by other minor women characters.

India is a country where patriarchy still takes hold of the personal rights of women to that extent that women are made mere dolls in the hands of males. She is over ruled by father, brother, lover, husband and son, in the different phases of her life. She doesn't have the freedom to make any decisions in her life, or to choose a career for herself. As per the study *The Roots of Gender Inequality in India: "Gender inequality in India is a crucial reality. In modern times, women are performing exceptionally well in different spheres of activities. Still majority of Indian women are facing the problem of gender inequality and discrimination. As per UNDP report, India ranks 132 out of 187 countries on gender inequality index (GII)"*(Amutha 1).

In the movie *Fashion* we see that Meghna Mathur (Priyanka Chopra) is seeking permission to her father to move on with her passion of modeling, but her father opposes her proposal. In the first scene of the film when Meghna tells her parents that: "I got my portfolio done. I was thinking of leaving for Mumbai on Monday." Her father's reply for her is: "Monday reminds me, I have spoken to Mehra Associates. They have agreed on an internship with them while you finish your chartered accountants course. In fact, you can start with them from Monday." This reply itself gives out the freedom that the prevailing system of patriarchy provides to the fathers, to take decision regarding the profession or future plans of his daughter even before having a discussion with her. The father here does not even bother to listen to his daughter's plans for her future.

Meghna is forced to disobey her father for her passion. Later, in the course of the movie we see that she touches the peak of success as a famous model, after much struggle. At this point of time we get impressed with the bold move in the movie against patriarchy.

But this impression fades away soon when we see that the heroine is unable to handle such a success for herself. She falls down from the glories of success and comes back to her family or particularly to her father, as a dependent. Her father at last, feels pity and sad about her condition and motivates her to take a second try. It's only then that she meets with true success in her life and career. This climax of even a female oriented revolutionary movie, makes us believe that females are not suppose to get out of the shadow of patriarchy to achieve true success.

Abhijeet Sarin (Arbaaz Khan) pushing Meghna to the front while they are enjoying Grape-treading, in their first meeting, can be explained as a symbol of men pushing forward women to achieve their success. But later we see him making advantage of her and throwing her away without any emotional consideration. We expect him to be punished for doing this somehow, but this expectation is portrayed as impossible and never takes place in the film, which is yet another warning to women and only women.

Shonali Gujral (Kangana Ranaut) is another main female character in the film. In one of the scenes we see, Shonali dining with her boyfriend and he ask her to drink the used water from his hand bowl since she loves him. The quarrel that arises from this incidents leads to a point where he pushes her down the stairs. The humiliation that she suffers from her boyfriend is also an example of patriarchy being a threatening to woman, which even results in violence against women. And when finally Shonali fails to handle her life alone, a question, whether women are capable of handling themselves creeps unconsciously into our minds.

Janet Sequeira (Mugdha Godse) is forced to marry a gay designer in the course of the movie due to her circumstances. She is portrayed as incapable to achieve true success for herself. She needs to get the help of Rahul Aurora (Sameer Soni) who is first her friend and then her husband (a gay designer). She settles down as a good wife after her marriage. Her life could have been a better message if she was seen doing modeling even after her marriage.

Avantika Sarin (Suchitra Pillai-Malika) is also another victim of patriarchy in the film, where she comes to understand her husband's extra-marital affairs many a times but is forced to remain quiet and act as if she is ignorant of it. But her husband never changes and moves on as a successful fashion man till the film ends.

Patriarchy and the problems it cause to women are the truths of Indian society. And this truth is shown as such in the film *Fashion*. But the film when gives out all the male characters as the winners over women throughout the film, it becomes a treat to the women, leaving behind less hope for an independent success.

### III. A FEMINIST READING OF CALENDAR GIRLS

*Calendar Girls* is a film about the life and experiences of five women from different places. The common thread that winds them up is that they are all ambitious women who try to overcome the difficulties on their way to success. The Calendar, for all of them is a starting point to their journey. But, it turns out to be a wrong choice in most of their life, except in the case of Mayuri Chauhan.

*Calendar Girls*, though a female centered film, portrays women as unfortunate people who have to submit themselves to the clutches of patriarchy to climb the ladder of success (in the eyes of society). Fashion world is set on money, fame, relationships and so on. A female artist (a model or actress) will lose her value and career if she does not appear in parties, entertain and please men. Women who move away from this well-laid path cannot continue with their profession even if they have proved themselves successful in their career.

This happens with Sharon Pinto (Kyra Dutt), the girl from Goa, who reacted against Aniruddh Shroff, who cooks stories between them. She loses her career opportunities, feels disappointed about the plight of fashion world and forced to take up a new career for her happy and successful life. She could have sustained her position in the fashion industry if she had kept silent towards Aniruddh's cooked up stories. The depiction of the negative side of reacting to a man's pranks (of losing her career), may make the audience feel that that women have to tolerate men's actions or else will they have to pay for it. It must also be noted that she has been aided by a man to have a successful career. This also depicts that men's influence on women is required for a woman's success.

On the other hand, the Calendar girl Mayuri Chauhan (Ruhi Singh) from Rohtak, becomes a successful Bollywood actress with the support and acclaim of her parents. She tries to impress and please them with her honey coated words. She utilizes every opportunity to make money and spend it to get the acclaim of the public. It should be noticed that she came to the industry with the support of her parents and finds it as a space to have a comfortable life. Her actions are directed by Mr. Tiwari, her private secretary. He is the one who tells her to impress everyone from the first day of shoot. Many scenes in the film show that he is taking decisions in her life and career and by depicting her successful career shaped by a man, the audience get an impression that women are dependent on men for their success.

In the film, it is shown that the glamorous and extravagant life of a calendar girl expires within an year. When the new Calendar comes, they will be replaced by a set of new girls and it continues. Every calendar girl finds it as a means to greater achievements in life. But on their way to success, men (father, brother, boyfriend, husband) stands as an obstacle. This is true in the case of Nazneen Malik from Pakistan (Avani Modi), Paroma Ghosh (Kolkata) and Nandita Menon (Akanksha Puri) from Hyderabad.

Nazneen's boyfriend Inzamam (Deepak Wadhwa), tries to prevent her from entering the glamour world. She leaves him, but he irritates her by making rude comments on her photographs that came up in the calendar. Later, she was forced to be an escort girl as it was only the means to live in India, where she couldn't be an artist. She gets frustrated when Harsh (her friend's husband) uses her as a mere object to satisfy his sexual desire. She regrets about her choice to be a Calendar Girl and calls Inzamam to accept her to get back to a normal life. In that scene, Inzamam has already found another person in place of Nazneen that itself shows that he considers women as merely objects to satisfy his lust. At last, she was all alone even in her death. No one came to receive her body. Here too, the helplessness of a young woman who chased her dreams in life is portrayed, which could make a negative influence on the audience that they feel that she could have led a better life if she would have surrendered to her boyfriend's wishes.

A similar tragedy awaits Paroma Ghosh (Satarupa Pyne) too. In the beginning, she is portrayed as a bold woman, who is forced to muster up courage to cross the restrictions imposed upon her by the patriarchal norms. She chooses herself to be a Calendar girl rejecting the words of her father and brother who try to discourage her in her journey to fulfill her dreams. They abandon her as she will ruin the name of the family. She says that she will make them feel proud one day. Male domination is clearly brought out through the relationship between Pinaki Chatterjee (Keith Sequeira) and Paroma Ghosh. He leaves her for his personal benefits and it should be noticed that he comes back to her after she becomes recognized and established in the glamour world to use her for his selfish motives. He does not make their relationship public and asks her to spend time with a famous cricketer to help him make money out of it. He considers her as an object to satisfy his sexual desires and to make money. It should be noted that her relationship with Pinaki leads to her defame. At last, he betrays her, she has been caught by the police and the news spread in the media. Her father and brother comes to rescue her and ask her not to come back to the house. Her brother asks her is this how she made them feel proud of her. She regrets about her decisions (her relationship with Pinaki) and tries to commit suicide. She stops as she feels guilty of her mistakes and has no other choice, but only to get into a reality show that runs around controversial personalities. She was forced to use defame to bring back a new life for her. The disappointment, regret and humiliation in Paroma's eyes reveals to the audience that her defame is the result of her decisions.

The girl from a reputed family of professionals (like engineers, CEO's) from Hyderabad, Nandita Menon, who finds Calendar girl as a starting point to her achievements also surrenders to the boundaries laid down by tradition and patriarchy when she quits modelling to be the daughter in law of a traditional business family-Narang. She leaves behind her passion and career for her husband and in-laws but they see her as a toy that moves according to their wishes. Harsh Narang, her husband, cheats on her sleeping with escort girls (even with Nazneen, Nandita's friend). Though she understood Harsh's relationships with those girls, she was advised by her father-in-law to tolerate it for the sake of the family's prestige (Calendar 1:41-1:44). He justifies that it is common among the rich and is just a means to get relieved of their stressed life. Nandita gets disappointed but soon changes herself to forget it and remains as Harsh's submissive wife. There is a scene in the movie that shows how women are conditioned by other women to renounce their wishes for a better living condition. This is explicitly depicted when her sister tells Nandita "Harsh is offering you a good and comfortable life. What more do you want?" (47:26-48:33). Nandita obeys her sister's words and tries to be a passive wife. This self-sacrificing image of Nandita makes the audience feel that women are mere objects to satisfy the sexual desires of men. They have to be loyal to their husbands, though the husbands are free to have any number of extramarital affairs to have a successful relationship. These gender stereotypes can affect the way people perceive things about life.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A work of fiction has no boundaries, whereas reality has certain restrictions which do not allow any personal touch in it. The disclaimers of the films *Fashion* and *Calendar Girls*, may be a gate way to such a freedom, or as usual might be a precaution from hurting anybody or being hated by anybody. But we would say that the freedom that the writers and the director had gained through the disclaimers of these films, could have been utilized for a more positive move against patriarchy and more positive hope for the victims of such glamour industries and social ideologies. Such a step incorporated in these movies would have been an inspiration for a better tomorrow, where women can stand for themselves, take their own decisions and chase their passions to success.

#### WORKS CITED

- [1]. Calendar Girls. Directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, performance by AkankshaPuri, AvaniModi, et al, Bhandarkar Entertainment, 2015
- [2]. Fashion. Directed by Madhur\_Bhandarkar, performance by Priyanka Chopra, UTV Motion Pictures, 2008
- [3]. Lexico powered by Oxford, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/revolutionary>
- [4]. MadhurBhandarkar.", Wikipedia,The Free Encyclopedia,22 September 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhur\\_Bhandarkar#Directorial\\_style](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhur_Bhandarkar#Directorial_style)
- [5]. Mishra, Deepanjali."Feminist Stance in the Movies of a Study with Reference to Fashion and Corporate". The Journal of Higher Education, vol.03, 3 October 2014, p 134.
- [6]. Amutha, D. "The Roots of Gender Inequality inIndia",SSRN,28 January 2017,p 1. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/3270344>.