



EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN THROUGH MEDIA: ROLE OF MEN BEHIND THE CAMERA

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Abstract:

Media has always been a significant platform to raise socio-political issues. Elections are won or lost, personalities and stars are created or marred, business houses are raised or razed— courtesy media. Media holds the power of discourse. Discourse, according to Foucault, refers to: ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which abide in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. Discourse aids in focusing on power relationships in society as expressed through language and practices. Media plays a vital role in expressing these power relations and makes use of language as a means to suggest the power equation prevalent in society between various factions. Media has over the years been instrumental in subverting the gender bias. Some of the films have treated the issue of emancipation of women on a very serious scale and the contribution of men towards this highly sensitive issue makes these films all the more commendable. One such movie is the National Award winning bilingual movie "Astitva", which shall be analyzed in detail in the paper.

Key Words: Discourse, Knowledge, Media, Power Relations & Emancipation

Emancipation of Women Through Media: Role of Men Behind the Camera:

In a recent article published in *The Tribune* titled "The pink men", while appreciating the role of men towards gender sensitization, the writer talks about the men responsible towards the production, direction and script writing of the path-breaking movie "Pink". The writer claims about the director of the movie, Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, "He looks every inch the man who would stand up for the power of pink." (Singh, *The Tribune*) Men, who have no qualms in accepting the fact that women are not the "Second Sex", are the ones who can stand up and raise their voice against the gender based discrimination. They should not be labelled as "Feminists". Rather, they should be termed as "Humanists". These are the men who also use the powerful medium of cinema to give voice to the repressed issues related to gender discrimination and raise thought-provoking dialogue between the chauvinists and the sensitized minds of the society. These men do not objectify women in their cinema. They do not offer the central role to the hero and relegate the heroine as an object to satisfy the male carnal fantasies. Often it has been said that cinema is the representation of society, but it has also been observed that cinema also influences the society in a major way. And over the years the place of women in society and the representation of women in cinema has been nothing much to boast about.

As a thumb rule it has been observed that though women occupy a central role in the domestic sphere, the same is not true about the society. When it comes to the social set up of the times the women have always been found to be in subordinate position as compared to their male counterparts of the same times. As a result women everywhere lack a generally acceptable social and cultural acknowledgement as well as authority. Why have women been relegated to the position of the "second sex" is the question that needs to be deliberated upon. (Sethi, 45)

Andrew Bennett in his essay 'Expressivity: the Romantic theory of authorship' talks about the various senses of the verb 'express'. According to him the OED gives various meanings of the word some of which include to 'press, squeeze, or wring out'; to 'represent by sculpture, drawing or painting' or to 'portray, delineate, depict'; to 'represent symbolically'; to 'represent in language... to give utterance to'; and to 'put one's thoughts into words'. He goes on to suggest that depending upon the expressive theory of authorship and the idea of expression on which it is based involves at least three propositions, one of them "involves the related but slightly different idea that language is made up of two intimately connected elements: an original abstract sense or meaning, on the one hand, and its formulation in words, on the other." (Waugh, 49) All these propositions form a part of the suggestions given by Michael Foucault that there is a wide shift in "post-classical reconceptions of the expressive function of language from an 'imitation and duplication of things' to a manifestation and translation of 'the fundamental will of those who speak.'" (Waugh, 49) Thus, language holds the quintessential power to "express". At the same time cinema is a form of media that uses verbal and non-verbal language to express and address sensitive issues.

There are innumerable movies where male directors have presented the entire narrative from the view point of a female character/s. What makes "Astitva" an outstanding movie, is not the theme or the excellent

portrayal of a woman suppressed and repressed who finds her voice in the end, but the fact that the entire concept has been directed and projected by a male director, Mahesh Manjrekar. Manjrekar, picks up the bold subject of adultery but finds the courage to project the heroine, the centre of the controversy, as totally justified, thus, defying the set norms of the chauvinist world, the director hands on the baton to the typical middle-class wife.

Astitva. Self-identity. The core of any individual's sense of being. Made simultaneously in Marathi and Hindi, *Astitva* deals with a woman's discovery that she too has an identity; she is her own being, a woman before she is daughter/wife/mother. This could be anyone's story. Here, in this film made at the cusp of two millennia, it is the story of Aditi, who happens to be a woman. And in telling this story, 'Aditi' becomes the reflection of many such other Aditis, who abound in our society. Women who have lost their identities within their familial systems, within marital relationships, within societal boundaries of what they should say or feel or do. (Conversations over Chai)

In a typically patriarchal setup, Aditi is a talented middle class wife for whom the day begins and ends with the whims and fancies of her husband, Sreekant and her only son Aniket. The story opens with Aditi's husband Sreekant throwing a volley of demands and orders to Aditi while preparing for his busy day ahead with meetings, parties, so on and so forth. In the middle of all this chaos he receives a phone call from his childhood friend, Ravikant, who lives in Goa. He informs Sree that he is in Pune along with his wife Meghna and will return to Goa next morning. Almost instantly, the busy schedule is reversed to welcome Ravi. The audience finds the super busy businessman throwing orders to his wife about not waiting for him over lunch and dinner instantaneously relaxes to accommodate his so called "underwear" friend. Shree promptly invites them home for lunch; meeting, office, impatience - all fly out the window. He asks Aniket to cancel all his appointments at office and come back home for lunch with his fiancée, Revati. Everyone's plans have to be rearranged to suit Shree. It is clear that both Aditi and Aniket are used to Shree's autocratic behaviour. Foucault's theory of discourse and the power language exudes in the social environment is evident in the conversation that ensues between Sreekant and Ravi over drinks and between Aditi and Meghna in the kitchen. The director presents Sree as the mouthpiece of a traditional Indian male who believes that the right place for a woman is the four-walls of her household and also that she should not try and compete with men professionally. He does not appreciate the fact that Ravi has married Meghna, a divorcee and a mother of two. While he prefers women to stay confined to her home and children, he doesn't mind his off and on soirees, read one-night stands, during his business trips abroad. He not only justifies himself calling these to be a man's needs but also gloats over the fact that it is a man's world. On the other hand, we find that Ravi in contrast to Sree is a sensible and sensitive man who understands and appreciates a woman's need for self-actualization.

Simultaneously, Aditi and Meghna are in the kitchen discussing their lives and ambitions. Meghna finds that Aditi has surrendered her passion for singing to meet the demands of her family and is in no mood to be "something more" than a wife now. Meanwhile, her son Aniket comes home along with his fiancée Revati and all of them sit down for lunch. Just then, they're interrupted by the arrival of the post - there's a registered post for Aditi. As she signs for the mail, Shree opens the envelope, much to Ravi's and Meghna's consternation. So what? She's *his* wife, isn't she? asks Shree as he makes a huge deal out of the fact that a man named Malhar Kamat, who lived in Hubli, had left his house, land, jewellery and a hefty bank account to Aditi. As he continues to drink, and get more and more boisterous, 'celebrating' Aditi's good fortune, he misses Aditi's expression of shock. It's only later that evening after Ravi and Meghna have left that Shree, recovering from his hangover, suddenly wonders just *who* Malhar Kamat is. Aditi has to jog his memory - Malhar Kamat used to teach her music. In fact, Shree had met him twice.

That night, as his usual practice, Sree sits down to write his diary and recalls the account of the days when he and Aditi were newly married and he was always busy with his business trips and stayed out of town for most of the time. When, lonely and aimless during his long absences from home, Aditi suggests taking up a job, he almost explodes '*Hamare gharaane mein na aaj tak kisi aurat ne naukri kii hai, na kisi ne karvaayi hai,*' he tells her bluntly. '*Mujhe apne ghar me biwi ke paise nahin chaahiye. Main apna ghar chala sakta hoon.*' (Astitva, 1992) In order to while away her time, Aditi had taken up learning music from a man named Malhar Kamat. On hearing Malhar praise Aditi's singing talent and that she could soon become a professional singer, Sree had made clear his intentions that singing could never be a vocation for Aditi. She need not sing for money as he earned enough to support her.

Sree takes up the diary he had written that year to cross check various facts and reads that he had been on continuous tours from one country to another and had hardly stayed home. Aditi had shown her displeasure and to compensate for all the lost time they had gone to Khandala for a week to celebrate their wedding anniversary. On reaching home, Aditi had fallen ill. She reassured Sree that it must have been something she had eaten and that she'll be alright. A couple of days later, he'd returned home elated - he'd secured another big contract - only to find Aditi in tears; she was pregnant. The diary reminds him of his disbelief at the time - he'd just secured a major contract, he'd looked at a plot for a bungalow, and now the news that he was to be a father. He was the happiest man alive! Aditi had tried to interrupt - she had something to tell him. But Shree hadn't

listened, hadn't paid heed to her evident grief. Now, Sree realizes that at that time, he had missed something vital. He reaches home and confronts Aditi. Aditi confesses to everything but the hypocritical male in Sree is not satisfied and he decides to shame Aditi further by forcing her to confess her adultery not only in front of his friends Ravi and Meghna but also in front of their son Aniket. Despite Ravi and Meghna objecting and Aditi avoiding to divulge everything in front of Aniket, Sree forces her. It is then that Aditi finds her voice. When all barriers are broken, the myth of a "happy family" is shattered Aditi also finds the voice to raise several questions. She not only raises questions about morality and sexuality but also challenges Sree about his "manhood".

Astitva makes Aditi the voice of any woman forced to subjugate her own desires to keep her marriage going. As Aditi points out with characteristic simplicity, what they (women) want is of no importance; keeping her *man* happy is a woman's prime responsibility. Sree has many extra-marital affairs; but he expects *her* to be completely faithful to him. (Conversations over Chai)

Once Aditi begins talking, she holds nothing back. She confesses that one momentary impulsiveness on her part resulted in the conception of Aniket but her biggest mistake was not listening to her sister, who advised her to abort the child. She desperately wanted to tell Sree everything but Sree was so elated to hear anything. So her biggest punishment has been to live with the secret. At this point in the aftermath of Aditi's revelations, Sree's mask of affability drops and he shows what he really is - a cruel, insensitive man who doesn't think twice before emotionally severing off his already shattered wife, the wife he professes to love. Even Ravi's defence of Aditi, or his pointed observation about Shreekanth's own marital infidelities do not make him face his own double standards. He reacts in the most shameless manner '*I'm a man, damn it!*' Besides, he has not brought home a baby! It is not enough for him that Aditi is punished by him; she has to be humiliated before their son, and his friends. In this final denunciation, he breaks both the illusion of marital happiness and the bond between his wife and the son who is her blood. Aditi decides to leave Sree's house forever but not before making him uncomfortable with her several questions and also making him ponder over his impotency!!

Astitva revealed the callous double standards by which society judges women, and by 'society', that includes both men and women. Women *are* still held to a different moral standard. Their chastity still forms the moral bulwark of society. Take that away, and society crumbles. (Conversations over Chai) However, the final assault does not come from Aditi. It comes from Revati. When Aniket denounces his mother and accuses her of infidelity, Revati defends Aditi and calls off her engagement with Aniket. She leaves him unsettled with the question about his own existence.

Thus, the movie is definitely unnerving for those men whose age-old idea of exerting power over women has been challenged and that too by a man, the writer and director of the movie. However, those men who wish to see women come out of their confines and recognise the power within have definitely appreciated the movie, as is evident from the fact that the movie won National Award not only for the Best Movie category but also National Award for its heroine. Lisa Vene Klasen and Valeries Miller in *A New Weave of Power* (2002, page 55) describe four 'expressions of power' as follows: 'Power over', 'Power to', 'Power with' and 'Power within'. 'Power within' deals with a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it includes the person's ability to identify individual differences while respecting others. 'Power within' is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfilment. Many grassroots efforts use individual storytelling and reflection to help people affirm personal worth and recognize their 'power to' and 'power with'. Both these forms of power are referred to as agency – the ability to act and change the world – by scholars writing about development and social change. (Expressions of Power, powercube)

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