

Bollywood's Influence on India's Rape Culture

When people think of Bollywood, they think of large, elaborate sets, annoyingly, catchy songs, corny romance, over-the-top fight scenes, and much more. Many don't think about Bollywood's large impact on society. Actors and actresses serve as role models for the younger generation and what these children and young adults see on screen shapes their mindsets and influences their actionsⁱ. So when the so-called "good guys" in films are portrayed as stalkers and eve-teasers, what messages are Bollywood sending to society? With the gruesome rape and murder of 23 year-old Jyoti Singh still fresh in the minds of Indian peopleⁱⁱ, it is not hard to question the influence Bollywood had on the incident. We certainly cannot blame Bollywood for the injustice against women in Indian society, but we can discuss how its continuous objectification of women and portrayal of men seem to reinforce certain aspects of rape culture in India.

Just drop the "Macho Men" act, dude.

"Macho men" in Bollywood are portrayed as overly masculine and unnecessarily violent. The "good guys" are shown to be just as violent as the "bad guys". Michael Kimmel, in his work "The Gendered Society", states that media "constructs those very gender differences" and reproduces gender inequality by making those differences seem "natural" and not "socially produced"ⁱⁱⁱ. The problem with the concept of "macho men" is by portraying the supposed "good guys" as overly violent men, it naturalizes violence in a way that makes members of the younger generation immune to it. In a scene from the movie *Dabangg* (2010)^{iv}, the male protagonist buys two pots from a beautiful woman. He drops them on purpose and then offers her money for two more. She refuses the money, stating that she "doesn't accept money for mistakes". In response, the male protagonist says, "I'm giving it [the money] to you with love, keep it. Otherwise I can

also slap you and then give it to you as well”^v. The scene is filled with sexual tension between the woman and the male protagonist. The woman is not moved by the potential of him slapping her and by the end of the movie, she marries the male protagonist. Scenes in which men threaten to use physical force on women have normalized violence against women. When women end up marrying or dating these men who threatened them in the first place, it reinforces these positive ideas of violence. There have been several real-life incidents of men molesting women and beating them in public. In one case, a 21 year old girl was molested in broad daylight after a man hit her bike with his motorcycle^{vi}. In a country that prides itself in gaining its independence by exercising non-violent forms of protest, it’s ironic that society so readily accepts violence in film. The men and boys of the younger generations have grown up with the mentality that being able to fight and be violent are characteristics that successful men all share, and that violence impresses women.

Another major characteristic of “Macho Men” in these films is they are almost always eve-teasers. According to the Oxford dictionary eve-teasing is defined as “The making of unwanted sexual remarks or advances by a man to a woman in a public place”^{vii} and examples of eve-teasing include cat-calling and groping. The problem with eve-teasing is not exclusive to South -Eastern society, but unlike in western film, eve-teasing is normalized in Indian film. Countless films have portrayed eve-teasing as harmless and as a practical joke. Men in film are supposedly being playful when they tease and whistle at a girl who is wearing a short skirt. It is Bollywood’s responsibility to ensure that the messages and portrayals they are perpetrating don’t harm one group of society. What makes this characteristic of “Macho Men” even more harmful is that many of the women that these men in movies eve-tease do not relay their distaste for the actions on screen. In fact, these same women end up falling in love with the eve-teaser. This is

dangerous for plenty of reasons. It shows that women are not affected by the eve-teasing. It also appears women may even enjoy being whistled at and groped. In a video titled “No Country For Women” created by the organization of the same name, there is a montage of clips from Bollywood films along with several interviews with young men and women. One young man when asked about eve-teasing retorted, “If they[women] wear skirts like Rakhi Sawant(Film actress), why won’t we tease?”^{viii}. Incidents like these show that younger generations of men have interpreted eve-teasing as a way of flirting and engage in the behavior themselves, not realizing its insulting nature.

“If I follow you around long enough, you will fall in love with me.” Yeah, right.

Young man obsessively follows girl around. She repeatedly tells him not to follow her. She yells at him. She may even slap him. He relentlessly pursues her. Impressed by his efforts, she falls in love with him.

At first glance, it may seem that this is a description for a strange thriller movie, but this is the basic plot summary of several romantic Indian movies. Some examples are *Raanjhana* (2013), *Saathiya* (2002) and *Deewane Mujh Se Nahin* (1990)^{ix}. It’s strange that the essential story line of the film is based on sexual harassment. Bollywood is making films that not only portray a woman’s “No” as useless and irrelevant, but also they romanticize the act of stalking^x. For example, in the film *Raanjhana*, the main protagonist’s best friend explains how he can impress a girl. He says, “ Listen man, in Uttar Pradesh [a state in India] there are two ways you can get a girl to like you. One way is through hard work. Day and night follow her. Outside her house, in school, while she’s shopping, in the streets, on your bicycle, in a taxi, in the temple. Cry, stop eating, cut your flesh and bother her so much that she becomes fed up and just comes to you”^{xi}. The main protagonist does just that. With this man, as the “good guy”, serving as a role model

for young men, Bollywood turns obsessive stalking into an appropriate form of expressing love. In February of this year, the *Times of India* reported on a stalking incident stating, "...arguing that as an ardent Bollywood film buff he believed that pursuing women was acceptable. He claimed that film heroes after all, relentlessly pursued women on screen, indicating this was culturally accepted behaviour" ^{xii}.

Stalking in films makes the objectification of women more acceptable ^{xiii}. When men in films stalk women, they treat them as objects that must be obtained. When the woman who is "the object of their affection" reciprocates that supposed love, younger generations of men interpret this continuous objectification of women as socially acceptable. They also are reassured that women enjoy being objectified. In *Raanjhana*, when the main protagonist's best friend explains how to gain the affection of the women in question, he talks about the process as though it was a formula that would help him on a math test. In an article discussing how the Bollywood classic *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) ^{xiv} reinforces the patriarchal structure in Indian society, the author states, "A girl is a prize to be won, and sexual harassment is the way to win her. Not only that, but the ultimate way to show respect for a woman is by refusing to marry her until her father literally hands her over to you – solidifying the female's complete lack of choice in the scenario" ^{xv}. In September of this year, a woman was stabbed to death by her ex-boyfriend after he continuously stalked her. It was reported that he would relentlessly stand outside her house and call her multiple times a day. From this example it is clear that the attacker treated the woman as an object needed to be won. When she continuously refused him and he realized that he could not have her, he killed her ^{xvi}. If men in films view woman as objects that must be won over or taken, younger men who are watching will view women similarly.

No she's not a dishonor to her family if she has pre-marital sex. Take a chill.

Sex in Indian society and culture is a taboo subject. In film, although improving, discussions about sex vary. In some films, characters are shown to be sexually independent and open-minded about pre-marital sex. In other films, characters are shown to be conservative on their thoughts about pre-marital sex. The disagreement usually occurs depending on where the film takes place. If it takes place in a rural area, the ideas are usually conservative, whereas in urban areas it is more liberal. The problem with the conservative side of this argument is that it only applies to women. If men have pre-marital sex, it is lauded, but if women do, it's frowned upon and in some cases leads to serious consequences for the woman. In a scene from the film *Goliyon ki Raasleela, Ramleela* (2013), the male protagonist is lauded by the other members in his village for having had sex with several women. In that same film, the female protagonist is dragged through the streets of the village for having been with a man before marriage and bringing "dishonor to her family" ^{xvii}. Just by the disparity between what happens to the male versus the female, one can understand how large the double standard regarding pre-marital sex is in India. The problem is that films like *Goliyon ki Raasleela, Ramleela* (2013) are simply reinforcing the ideology that already exists.

In a scene in the movie *Mere Brother Ki Dulhan* (2011), the female protagonist, who comes from London to India, complains to her friend about the disparity in thought between a woman and man's sex life. Her friend responds, "This is India, not London. Every country has their own thought, culture.....They[Indian girls] have shame, they are delicate, they behave in a certain way. It doesn't mean that you are wrong. You have every right to have fun, but if you do it here, you're going to find guys that are going to take it the wrong way" ^{xviii}. Although the scene does not blame the woman for her desire it does not argue against or even point out the il-

logical nature of the ideology. The film once again reinforces the stereotypes and notions surrounding women and pre-marital sex.

For many, virginity before marriage is a matter of woman's honor. For others, a woman's virginity before a marriage especially a daughter's or sister's, is a matter of family honor. In a scene from the film, *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999), after finding out that her daughter has been seeing a man for several months, the mother asks her daughter, "Have you done something that could embarrass us [our family]" ^{xix}? Many families in India have an ideology in which they approach women's virginity before marriage as a family value and if that is broken, it is a family disgrace. The idea is part of an age-old cultural tradition that is not only a South Asian phenomenon. In fact, it's relevant globally. An anonymous writer wrote an essay "El Movimiento and the Chicana" in the book *Chicana Feminist Thought*, describing the double standard in the Chicana woman's life. The author discusses the double standard regarding pre-marital sex with women and the general confusion it creates. The author states, "They [men] distort her actions and make foolish actions that strong women are dikes just because she will not go to bed with him...". But it is also expected for a Chicana to be a virgin before marriage and to "remain naive about sex throughout her entire married life" ^{xx}. By reinforcing such an expectation and stereotype, films like *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* are undermining a woman's personal choices and are playing with the over-arching, larger question of who truly has the right to a woman's body. When the family has the final say in what a woman does with her own body, they are claiming that they have rights to her body. They are obstructing her right to make her own choices regarding her body.

In an live interview with an Indian television station, the defense lawyer for the gang-rapists in the 2012 Jyoti Singh rape case stated,

If my daughter or sister engaged in pre-marital [sexual] activities and disgraced herself and allowed herself to lose face and character by doing such things, I would most certainly take this sort of sister or daughter to my farmhouse and in front of my entire family, would put petrol on her and set her alight (source).

The statement received harsh criticism from all groups in society, particularly for its brutal imagery. But the reality is, there are people who agree with this statement. Thoughts about pre-marital sex are based upon religious and cultural traditions. In order to overcome them, a combination of time and influence are required. Although it is hard to change the mindsets of older generations, the minds of younger generations are free to be molded. A medium like film is powerful and has the capacity to influence many, when used correctly and to its full capacity.

But aren't films only for entertainment?

Many who argue against the idea that films have a large impact on society discuss how they are made purely for entertainment purposes and simply reflect what already occurs in society. However, films are supposed to be made for entertainment, as are literature, television and music. But as with all these mediums of media, they are almost never made for entertainment purposes only. Sometimes they amuse and divert, but they also educate. For several years musical artists have made music that talk about social issues going on at the time. Some examples are, Marvin Gaye and his album in the 1970's, "What's Goin' On"^{xxi}, and the famous Beatles song "Revolution" in 1968 which both comment on political issues at them time. Literature like Shakespeare's *Othello*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* make statements about societal issues. Film is no different. It has the power and impact that can be used to make several changes to society's ideology. Currently it does, but in a way that ends up harming one group of poplin society.

Many argue that film simply reflects what is already occurring in society. But if films reflect what is happening in society, should they not also show the consequences of those behaviors and actions as well ^{xxii}? If directors and actors are reflect what is occurring in society, then they should show what it means for a woman to be “Eve-teased”. If they are going to reflect what occurs in society, then they should show how men get into trouble or are arrested if they are overly violent. If they are going to reflect what occurs in society, films should show what should happen to men if they grope or threaten or stalk a woman.

Is Bollywood changing?

It is important to mention that actors and actresses in Bollywood have begun to realize how large of an impact their films have on society. In an interview on the controversial talk show “Satyameve Jayate”, actresses from Bollywood discussed how they were being represented in films. When asked whether they would date the person their character was dating in real life, all of them stated no. They discussed the image that they have on screen does not translate to off-screen and how stalking on screen is being covered up as love and affection. One actress, Kangana Raunaut, made comparisons between the impact of characters in Shakespearean novels and the characters in Bollywood movies. She stated,

The most dark and negative characters that Shakespeare created. If you look at it, their influence is so positive. You become afraid of them. You’re scared of that darkness. But here [in Bollywood] we show these male characters, the words that they are using to describe the women.....Sometimes he’ll try to snatch at her clothing..... She’ll keep saying no, doesn’t matter, he’ll keep on attempting. We can try to defend our country and our work but what we are perpetrating to young people is shameful ^{xxiii}.

Movements such as “Frame Her Right” have brought attention to on-screen violence against women in films and television ^{xxiv}. Films such as *Queen* (2013) ^{xxv}, *Chak De India* (2007) ^{xxvi}, *English Vinglish* (2012) ^{xxvii}, *No One Killed Jessica* (2011) ^{xxviii}, *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) ^{xxix}, and so many more, have done a wonderful job highlighting sexism and social injustice against women in Indian society. Bollywood has the power to impact people of the masses. It is clear that people view Bollywood actors and actresses as role models and are inspired by them. With great power comes great responsibility. Many progressive ideological changes can be made if Bollywood steps up to the responsibility.

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^{xxvii} *English Vinglish*. Dir. Gauri Shinde. Prod. R. Balki, Sunil Lulla, Rakesh Jhunjhunwala, and R. K. Damani. Perf. Sridevi, Mehdi Nebbou, Priya Anand and Adil Hussain. Eros International, 2012. Film.

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^{xxix} *Dil Dhadakne Do*. Dir. Zoya Akhtar. Prod. Farhan Akhtar and Ritesh Sidhwani. Perf. Anil Kapoor, Shefali Shah, Priyanka Chopra, Ranveer Singh, Farhan Akhtar and Anushka Sharma. Eros International, 2015. Film.