

## **BREAKING THE STEREO TYPES: A STUDY OF THE MOVIE ASTITVA**

By

**Sweta Kumari**

*Research Scholar, P.G. Department of English, Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya, Bihar. India.*

### **Abstract**

*Women have been depicted in an emblematic image of Sita, Radha, Savitri, and Mira repeatedly on screen since ages. In fact, women are seen to be extreme sufferers in comparison to their male-counterparts. Likely they have been treated merely as pretty dolls by the society. With the passage of time, the same prevailing image of women has been questioned in varied manner through films which gave women a new space on celluloid. The film, Astitva (2000) is directed by Mahesh Manjrekar. It portrays Aditi as a traditional Indian housewife in the beginning of this movie and later on the same represents her as an independent, rebellious and a self-respected woman. In a way, the film is an exploration of how Aditi becomes expressive and decisive with times especially when she suffers humiliation and disgrace on the part of her husband. Apart from this, she recognizes her individuality when she finds herself of being treated as "other" in her own house. Thus, the present study focuses on Aditi asserts herself for a respectable life and how she interrogates bond of marriage and a woman's space in society. Moreover, the paper re-defines feminism with a different outlook on how Aditi emancipates herself from the subordination of the male-dominated society.*

**Keywords:** *marriage, independence, hypocrisy, subordination, feminism, humiliation.*

India is the biggest film industry in the world wherein Indian films are screened over a more than hundred countries and watched by nearly four billion people worldwide. With the beginning and rising of film Industries in India, women started to be represented on screen following from mythological stories and great epics. The first feature Hindi Film is *Raja*

*Harischandra* (1913), directed by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913. In the beginning of this film industry, women were not ready to act. Even courtesans did not agree to act because they considered it to be against their dignity. At last, a hotel better was presented in the role of woman as *Taramatiin Raja Harischandra* (1913). However, in his next film, *Mohini*

*Bhasmasur* (1913), Dadasaheb Phalke was determinant to make a woman agree to play the role of a female protagonist and eventually, a Marathi actress, Kamalabai Gokhale was ready to act in this movie in spite of lots of troubles. Seeing her, other woman also gained confidence to act in further movies. And today women own dignity acting in film industries. But the fact is that women have been seen on screen and off screen in secondary role against their male-counterparts. They play either the role of someone's wife, mother, sister or the love interest of the hero. In other words, women are mostly depicted as inferior to men on celluloid.

Women's place is an interrogation within media power structure as well as in the mainstream of Indian society. As a matter of fact, women's representation and their stereotypical role in Indian cinema are still prevalent today. Women have been portrayed as an epitome of sacrificing mothers, obedient sisters, ideal and meek wives or submissive life-partners. Right from the beginning, filmmakers have maintained traditional Indian values and successfully depicted women in the image of typical Indian. They are well-inherited with the potentialities of

mythical characters-Sita, Radha, Meera and Savitri. The films like, *Dahej* (1950), *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (1962), *Saraswatichandra* (1968) and *Uski Roti* (1969), *Devi* (1970) and *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988) are great model for representing typical Indian housewives. Women in these films are represented as an epitome of loyalty, and virtue. Moreover, they were subjugated throughout their life due to the existing male-dominated society. But, with the passage of time, there came change in women's role. Revolting, expressive and career-oriented women began to be seen in films wherein these women take stand for themselves. The films like *Abhiman* (1973), *Ankur* (1973), *Manthan* (1976), *Yeh Nazdekian* (1982), *Bhumika* (1997) etc. presented women in a new image which had a great impact on society as well.

The film, *Astitva* (2000) is remarkable for bringing change regarding women's representation on celluloid. In a very explicit way, the film interrogates the stereotypical portraiture of women in Hindi Cinema and people's views regarding women in Indian society at large. According to Barnow and Krishnaswamy, Chandulal Shah, was

the first film producer to make women-centric film and his first film was *Typist Girl* (1926). Likely he directed five films, out of which his film *Gunsundari* (1927) proved to be a milestone in the rise of Indian film having social issues. Thus, the issues regarding women came to be treated through cinematic narratives at large like in the film *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Duniya Na Mane* (1937), *Mother India* (1957), *Sujata* (1959), *Bhumika* (1977), *Ek Baar Phir* (1980), *Prem Rog* (1982), *Nikaah* (1982), *Arth* (1982) *Aakhir Kyon?* (1985), *Swadesh* (2004) and so on. Women in the said films have been portrayed on screen revolting against the patriarchal set-up for living a respectful and independent life.

Aditi in *Astiva* is simply a house-wife in the beginning of the film. She meets another woman in her life, Meghana, an independent, straightforward, career-oriented woman. Meghana is quite different from Aditi in respect of household and responsibilities towards her life. This is evident when Meghana converses with Aditi:

Look at me only after the divorce did I realise that I should have been doing something. One must not give up one's self-respect, certainly

not for the sake of a man. I started boutique of my own. It's doing well and most importantly I am standing on my own feet. I don't need any man's support. You should do something, too. (Manjrekar, 2002)

Ratan Pathak Shah has well observed women's portrayal on Indian screen that, "the women in the country have always been represented as the Sati or Devi (the goddess). There was no exploration of woman as a person. If we can put out the idea of women as epitome of sacrifice, it is sold everywhere in India and popular art is particularly guilty of that." (Millennennium post NO HALF TRUTH) But, here Meghana is not Sati or Devi rather she is a woman who stands and does raise her voice not only for herself but for other women, too, whenever she notices wrong happenings around her.

As a matter of fact, films reflect the Society we live in. They are highly inspired from the cultures prevalent in the society and some films witness to influence and bring change in the society as well. Here, Aditi leads a simple life as an ideal mother and wife. She opines that it is too late for her to do something in life. Aditi's

husband, Shrikant Pandit is a narrow-minded person. For him, a woman is meant for house hold. He does not allow Aditi to do any job outside the home. On the contrary, he takes her for granted most of the time. Meghana, too reacts badly on Shrikant's behaviour towards Aditi. Meghana is surprised to see Shrikant's so-called male chauvinistic nature when a letter comes on Aditi's name and Shrikant starts opening it and he claims "but she is my wife, isn't she? What difference does it make?"(Manjrekar, 2002). Shrikant does not respect Aditi's sentiments and privacy. He treats her as his property and responsibility and not as his wife. Regarding this, the filmmaker, Vishal Bhardwaj has pointed out that it is time for the men to come forward to end women's suppression. He says, "the suppression of women is going on in the society for a long time. I think the onus is on men to come out and protest against the suppression of women."(MIRRORNOWNEWS.COM)

Finally, Aditi breaks her silence. As she is not a silent sufferer like other women, we have seen in earlier films like *Dahej* (1950), *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988) etc rather she questions her place in her husband's life. Shrikant is

always busy in business tours for making money. Aditi questions her existence in his life as he does not spare time with her. Aditi says, "Not two months in two years we have been married, have we stayed home, Mauritius, Singapore, Colombo and where else! Never ending tours. And here I am at home, all alone! All the time." (Manjrekar, 2000) Aditi's interrogation continues to go:

Plans! Your plans for yourself where do I fit in your plans, do we? I feel alone Shree. This loneliness is terrifying. Had we even a child, I wouldn't have put up with everything. Even your absence. (Manjrekar)

Aditi meets another woman, Revati as her daughter-in-law. Revati, too is a modern, independent and self-respected woman. Her father-in law, Shrikant Pandit says about Revati when she doesn't agree to join his company, "So many times I have told her to quit the job. What do we lack? Why does a bride of our family have to work? But this girl won't listen. She is a modern woman you know. And modern women love to be independent." (Manjrekar) In the meantime, Revati became well-acquainted with Shrikant and Aniket's narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy,

and thus, she later on denies marrying Aniket. She says:

I consider myself the new-generation, broad-minded, unprejudiced. That's what I look for. I don't think I am any less than a man in anything...what's wrong for me being a woman must be wrong for you, too. What's within your rights as a man is within my rights too...despite the fact that I am a woman. (Manjrekar)

To conclude, it does take time for Aditi to protest against her husband's hypocritic mentality when she is subjected to the extreme in this male-dominated society and when she suffers humiliations as a wife and mother. She turns out to be rebellious in time in the later part of the movie.

She is also a victim of her husband's hypocrisy which forces her to leave her in-laws house for the sake of her own dignity and self-respect. She says, "Everything is over. But today I don't regret giving it all up. Mrs. Aditi Shrikant Pandit. The Aditi Part got lost. The open skies are calling me. I am eager to find my identity. Yes, I am a bit nervous. But I am not afraid at all." (Manjrekar) Here, Aditi, Meghana and Revati in *Astitva* (2000) are independent individuals who remain ideal until the things are balanced in their married life. As their lives goes in disordered way because of their so-called husbands, they do raise their voice against the injustice. Thus, these women are expressive and bold in their decision from the beginning and they do not hesitate to interrogate men's mindset towards women in this social set up.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



**Sweta Kumari** (Gold Medalist, M.A.) is a research scholar in the Department of English, Magadh University Bodh-Gaya, Bihar, India. She is a poetess and short story writer. Her writings are inspired from her own life and experiences. Besides, her writings also focuses on social issues and day-to-day happenings in the society. She got her first two poems entitled "Tranquillity in Life" and "The Dejected House" published in an Annual Magazine of SPARC (Society for Promotion of Arts & Culture), Karim City College, Jamshedpur, 2016-17. She has written about more than sixty poems that touch upon the current societal issues like dowry, widows, divorcee, humanity, women empowerment, identity and one's survival in the existing society. Thus, she contributed her poems in the national and international anthologies like *Sending Love to Mom*, *The Brimming Bards*, *Bliss of Childhood*, *Poetry for Peace*, *Holistic Healings of Widows*, *The Pillar: Father's Day Presentation 2019*, *Blissful Remenscing Soul*, *Envision Arts Magazine* and others. She has been awarded "Father Day Presentation 2019 Best Budding Poet of The Year" by Planet for the Budding Poets. She has been awarded the certificate for Outstanding Performance Poetry Recitation Award by the Literati Council, India in an International Conference, 15-16 June, 2019 on Widow's Problem and their Solutions held at Vimal Bihar, Gokul Mathura. She has been selected as one of the 75 Rising Stars 2019 and nominated as Literoma Laureate Award in Best Aspiring Author. She has been also selected for India Star Passion Award 2019 in Poetry and writing. She has participated and presented several scholarly papers in national and international Conferences and workshops. Her areas of interest are feminist studies, post-colonial studies, and film studies.

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