



Depiction of Marital Relationships in post-millennial India in Indian films: An attempt at Canon Formation

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Abstract

The paper deals with the change in the approach to the man-woman relation and to marriages in India in the post-millennial age as depicted through popular commercial films. It tries to find out whether the films are representations of life or are they part of the agenda of the canon formation team. For the purpose, the paper is divided into two parts: first, the study of the traditional concept of the role of man and woman in India, and marriages. And, secondly, the study of the new age films portraying a change in the concept of marriage which represents Indian culture in microcosm.

Key words: Canon formation, Literature, Relationships, Post-millennial, Globalization

Literature has always expanded itself and encompassed whatever form it has assumed through centuries and has held up these forms reverentially and absolutely. It is true, some works of art were rejected too because of their unconventionality or objectionable portrayal of certain things. But they were never obliterated from public domain entirely. Even though certain themes or genres were not accepted by popular consent, they were upheld by the critics and as such attained recognition. In the same way, films which emerge from literature, and which are more powerful than the written word, have been accepted and rejected both in different era by different sets of people and for different reasons. Films, throughout the last century have influenced the mindset of millions of people. So, when films like 'Baazigar' or 'Darr', with an anti-hero were released, many girls started getting crank calls. They imagined the passionate man would be worth risking their lives. No one can deny the fact that films play a major role in institutionalizing certain norms.

The post-millennial world has seen an upsurge of literature, in both written and presented form. There are many instances where the written forms are converted into films, rolling into huge success at the box office because of multiple of factors, chief among them being the political and commercial angle. Whom to eulogize and whom to shun is defined, it has been seen, not on the merit of the film but on the political will of a few. Such initiations by the elite and the influential lead to the cultural canon formation which happens gradually but surely. Canons are the measuring rods with which we gauge other similar things, and, also accept them as the standard. Films like Hum Aapke Hain Kyon remain in public memory for a long time to come. And films like Satya which depict violence, perversions also remain in public memory.

One of the major themes of Indian films is the institution of marriage. Many films would entail the journey of the central characters in search of grooms or brides and the eventual drama. Some others indirectly depict the dynamics of the family.

In these kinds of films, a certain way of presentation of the institution of marriage in India, the use of language when family interacts with each other, family relations, husband-wife relation, cultural depiction, parents – children relationship etc. is shown. This depiction has changed in the recent past. Let us analyze the changed dynamics in this paper.

India is defined by its cultural and traditional trademark. All would agree that marriage is at its center. Almost all the activities of life revolve round this institution in India. Girls are groomed and educated with the idea of playing a role in society. They are expected to get married to 'nice and well-to-do boys'. Boys are educated so that they can settle in life with a decent family. All their waking lives, the husband and wife think, plan, dream and live the lives of their children and wait for their eventual marriages. The parents' lives are defined by the success of the marriages of their children.

The system of arranged marriages has come a long way since child marriages were prevalent in Indian society. Back then, the groom would be perhaps 12-13 and the bride would be 8-9 years old. Naturally the decisions were taken by the elders according to the status of the families. The belief was that the man and woman played a major role in procreation and nurture. They were the backbone of the entire family. Obedience was the key word. Gradually, as the focus shifted to education, rationality dictated that the age of marriage be fixed by the Government. Steps were taken to stop child marriages. Yet the whole process and the idea of marriage remained the same. Parents would find a suitable groom or bride and marry off their children. Rebellions were also recorded in some cases. But by and large, the Indian hero or heroine would always respect their elders, strive very hard to get the consent of their elders and would sometimes lay down their lives also for the betterment of the family. The major focus of young people is to convince the parents, not hurt their sentiments because they believe that the elders' decision would be wise and for their betterment. Indian morality never admitted physical intimacy before marriage as well as outside marriage. The

sacredness and dedication which was expected of the couple towards their relationship cemented the bond forever. It usually was carried over to the next life also. Literature and Films have had similar themes in the past.

With the advent of Globalization, the concept of marriage has changed. It is natural that every generation will invite some or the other change. The traditional marriage has given way to love marriages. Girls are becoming more liberal, experimental and bold in demanding freedom in the choice of the groom. The change can be termed as the 'cultural liberation of the once subjugated people'. Even though the institution of marriage has not changed much, the process is adjusted according to the situation. Indian society has imitated the Western culture and behavior. The colonizers have affected the psyche of the colonized to a great extent. Liberation, and more liberation is the dream of the many. Not settling for less, to defy the existing way of living, to continuously search for something which is not there, has become the focus of the youngsters. A mutual adjustment in marriages has started gaining ground in the post-millennial era. The inter-caste, inter-religion, inter-racial marriages slowly entered and eventually were accepted by the multitude.

In the last five to seven years, though, the dynamics have changed. With every other household having cases of inter-caste marriages, cases of separation and divorces, the equation is accepted by many. Literature has always portrayed life as it is. More emphasis is given to as it ought to be. The idealism of life was preached through the writings, and it inspired the social culture too. What is puzzling though is with the advent of globalization and the OTT platform, a drastic change has occurred in the portrayal of men and women, of marriage and family, value system, the language used and power dynamics of society. Girls imitate the boys even in things which are not good. Instead of stopping the boys from drinking, smoking, addictions and other notorious things, in the name of equality, the girls have now embraced them. Being modern and educated has got a new meaning in the post millennial world. Now the question no longer

remained of how the West is portraying the East. It has become more internal. How is the East portraying the East? The focus has shifted from 'what ought to be' to 'what is'.

For the present study, the researcher has chosen some of the popular and commercially viable Hindi films: *2 States* (2014), *Kabir Singh* (2019), *Manmarziyaan* (2018), *Haseen Dilruba* (2021) and *14 Phere* (2021). There are a multitude of other films made which deal with similar themes. Let us study these films in order of mention.

The film *2States* is based upon a novel of the same name written by the popular writer of this generation, Chetan Bhagat. Before writing *2States*, he already has to his credit many films like '*3 Idiots*' based on 'Five Point someone' and *Kai Po Che* (2008) based on 'The three mistakes of my life' to name a few. Both these films did very well at the box office. The novel 'Two States' has equally been successful with attracting a large revenue. *2States* was directed by Abhishek Varman and produced by Karan Johar and Sajid Nadiadwala. The total budget was 320 million rupees and it earned 1.75 billion rupees in return. The story of *2States* revolves round a couple just in their college played by Alia Bhatt and Arjun Kapoor. One belongs to a Punjabi family and the other to a traditional 'Madras family'. There is cultural difference and moreover there is broken family vs close-knit family situation. What is remarkable though is that the film shows the culture of a prestigious institution like IIM. Along with studies, the boys and girls use each other's' hostels as places to meet and mingle. Pre-marital physical involvement, leading to setting up of the parents' meeting and then eventual efforts in reconciliation between the two families forms the story line. The heroine has gained a voice of her own. She also has a career which is equally important as the hero's career. Both the hero and heroine have no qualms regarding pre-marital sex. This happened in 2014. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2_States_\(2014_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2_States_(2014_film)))

The other film 'Kabir Singh' is a remake in Hindi of the South Indian film Arjun Reddy written and directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga and produced

by Bhushan Kumar and Murad Khetani. The budget was 68 crore rupees, and it earned a profit of 380 crores as mentioned in social media. In *Kabir Singh*, the same sequence follows. Prestigious College, where intelligent and ambitious students tend to seek admission year after year. With zero skill in anger management, Kabir Singh played by the popular actor, Shahid Kapoor, and the pliant Preeti played by the heartthrob Kiara Advani, end up having pre-marital physical involvement not once but multiple times. The non-acceptance by the family and the eventual degradation of the hero in the arms of addiction is portrayed with such passion that it would seem to be worth imitation. The rest of the story is well known. This happened in 2019. The film was released in theatres in June 2019 and enjoyed success even on popular OTT platform in times of pandemic. Can we say that in the five years since *2States*, the social acceptance of pre-marital sex was more when *Kabir Singh* happened? (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabir_Singh)

The third film '*Manmarziyaan*' revolves round the torrential physical relation between Taapsee Pannu and Vicky Kaushal, both popular among the young generation. Here, the heroine's rebellion spurts out of her wild will. She takes her own decisions and does not hold the hero responsible for the eventual loss of sanctity. Rather the question of multiple partners does not arise. The question of marriage is not raised but assumed by the heroine. The film also shows extra-marital relation when the heroine indulges in physical relation with her boyfriend after marriage too, only to regret it later. The film is written by Kanika Dhillon, directed by Anurag Kashyap and produced by Phantom Films and Anand Rai. It earned a profit of 40.39 crore rupees.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manmarziyaan>

Two more films need to be mentioned here. They were released on the OTT Platform recently in 2021. One is '*Haseen Dilruba*' and the other is '*14 Phere*'. *Haseen Dilruba* is directed by Vinil Mathew and stars Taapsee Pannu and Vikrant Massey. It is still watched by many on OTT. Both the films show pre-marital and extra-marital relation

interwoven in the narrative. In *14 Phere*, the hero and heroine belong to different castes and are sure of non-acceptance by their respective families. And yet they are live-in partners. The constant remark by the heroine is noteworthy here. She insists on going to America and pleads with her boss to assign both the same project so that they can escape the clutches of the orthodox and barbaric men of their families. America is portrayed as a place where their dreams would be realized, where there would be no trouble, where they would get space to live and settle down, where they would be accepted, since they are liberated.

The conflict between the traditional values and the modern liberated world that the men and women live in, is apparently seen in the above-mentioned films. Almost in all the films, the couple wants their families' blessings for their marriage. The movies revolve round convincing the parents. This has been the case in Indian films since long. These and more such films are weaving the concept of free will in matters of sex which was not there in the past century. In case of marriage, the blessings of the family is needed. But sex can be with mutual consensus before or outside marriage surreptitiously. When such things are repeatedly shown on popular platforms by popular actors, it takes no time in institutionalizing the concept. The issue is not whether this is right or wrong. As some might argue that we cannot be custodians of society, that all of us have right to experiment and live life. The issue is that should popular literature go on breaking these constructs just for the sake of breaking (and minting more money), and pave the way for the mass to take inspiration from this representation? Is it the true representation of society or is it inspiring society to go in the direction which a few dictate? The above films have all young and dynamic writers, directors, producers and actors. In the past, some characters would behave in this way, speak slang language, or continuously use swear words. These used to be character actors / side actors / villains in a film. Now it is so repeatedly done, and by central characters, that one might think that this is the norm, that it is acceptable to abuse the other when things don't go our way.

When films on nationalistic fervor are made, the public gets inspired by them. Patriotic songs, beautiful love songs and songs related to other aspects of life, all get equal response from the public. Films are popular and pose a strong attraction for the young generation. They are a direct challenge to the established institution of marriage as we see it. The next generation do want marriages but on their own terms. So that the sacrifice that marriages sometimes ask for, are not acceptable to many. The result can be separation or divorce or extra marital relations. It has been shown in films that both the partners are equally capable of consuming alcohol and smoking which was the domain of men. Breaking stereotypes is the buzz word because something different, something unique would sell. Almost 80% films made nowadays have high budget, exotic cinematography, soulful renditions and larger than life portrayals. The producers want to do business and earn profits. These films fit into the changing times and the psychological needs of the common people.

It seems that the post-millennial generation is moving towards new canon formation. Canon formation implies that certain work of art or processes are made to be accepted by the society through repeated portrayals of similar themes. It sometimes becomes the naturalized thought process of the multitude and acquires an almost legal status. Homosexuality or pan-sexuality has also been the focus of OTT series in the recent past. There are many agencies working in establishing these canons. The producers and sponsors who have risked a lot of money, the critics and historians, the biographers and translators and research scholars all contribute in their own way in canon formation. When a film releases, the film magazines, blog reviewers hail certain works, writers and actors. They eulogize their thoughts and performances and influence the readers or the spectators. The writer - director - actor's work is mentioned again and again in social media. This is one of the ways of canonical familiarization. The other is fulfilled by the Art Critics. And the rest is done by the general public.

The people involved in making these films are all Indians, men and women. Here, the East

portrays the East in the way a few of the elite class want their narratives to be. They want to imitate the West with its liberalized attitude, individualism, and free existence. Or is it a reaction to the portrayal of the East by the West till now through their popular culture? Is it that the gen-next want to show to the entire world that we are liberated by questioning the established institutions, by removing the tag of the subverted group being labelled by the West since years? Has freedom of being gained so much prominence that the young generation is getting attracted towards western culture?

It has been seen that in India, the rate of young people leaving the country and settling abroad has increased. The rate of separations and divorces has also increased manifold. The rate of old people forced to live an isolated life even though their children are around has increased. It has been seen that the number of people cheating on their spouses, and the number of people indulging in immoral activities has also increased. This can be due to many factors. One of them could be the portrayal of and institutionalization of such themes in the common media, the films.

Indianness is an amalgamation of religion. It is an acceptance of the food habits of every region. It is the way we dress in every part of India. It is in the multitude of languages that we speak, in the festivals and rituals we perform. It is in the respect we possess for our elders; in the care we take of the old people. It is the obedience that we display as a sign of our strength. It is the sacredness of relation of man and woman who form the foundation of a healthy family. And above all, it is the belief that the larger good should come first. On the other hand, the Western culture would give importance to their desires and individual happiness. Independent thought-process leads them to live alienated lives. They fall prey to depression and disorientation sometimes resulting in disintegration. This goes against the dictum that Man is a social animal. Indians believe that the strength of man lies in togetherness. This forces us to think whether the above-mentioned portrayal of India in front of the world is on the agenda of a selected few. Does young India want to have a happy combination of the

traditional and the modern? And if yes, should there be a scrutiny of content, language and presentation of the film and OTT media reaching and influencing the multitude?

We can create path-breaking movies expanding and enlightening our minds. True liberation of the self can be achieved in other ways too. For that purpose, there is no point in diluting the essence of our Indian culture which is revered all over the world. True representation and idealism can be the basis of the popular media. Canons if to be formed can be beacon lights guiding us in the good direction.

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