

Translating Violence from Texts onto Screen: Violation of Human Rights



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ABSTRACT: The paper aims to explore the translation of violence from textual sources to the screen and its implications for human rights violations. The art forms we create are a product of our collective memories of experiences. Whereas many other forms of expression produce still images that need to be viewed, read or heard to get an impact and reaction. Cinema as a moving visual art brings together likeminded people to create visuals that immediately attract all segments of our society. The reactions are often generated instantly and spreads through various social media platforms, generating much debate and heat. The social imbalances between man and woman have been subjects of many novels and stories. The different power equations between different castes have also been focused at times. Despite making much progress – both in terms of social movements and legal provisions, domestic violence still persists in India. It is rather on the rise in India posing a great concern for the human rights activists. Whereas the verbal texts have had limited effects in raising our consciousness, once transferred into life-like visuals, women become visibly matters of objectification. Most stop at raising the gender issues as their critiques. The research utilizes a multimodal approach, considering both the visual and verbal elements of film texts. By understanding the significance of film as a medium and its impact on viewers, this study provides insights into the intersection of cinema, society, and human rights.

KEYWORDS: Domestic Violence, Human Rights, Cinema and Society, Social Issues and Films

INTRODUCTION

The Indian cinema industry has a huge impact on society, producing numerous films each year that reflect social norms and attitudes. Although many films are translations of verbal texts depicting the prevailing social conditions, the reactions and interpretations on screen generate a chain effect – usually not visible after the story or novel is published in print. Like fictions touching various themes and genres, the films tell stories in a much more subtle and crafted manner, with a clear focus. This is because as a cultural medium, films reflect the ‘dominant’ attitudes. And when it’s about a discourse on gender, Indian films quite often support patriarchal views and reinforce the viewpoint of the women being the weaker sex. The tension could also go deep down to the experiences of various kinds – physical versus psychological or emotional. But as the printed texts get semiotically translated into films, they play a more important role in shaping the perceptions of readers/viewers. And violence against women continues to be perceived as an acceptable phenomenon. Some may pick and choose this theme in the name of depicting realism. But generally speaking, it has been a theme of many films and television series, and a great favourite amongst the contemporary film makers. Though there have been many such films, studies that look at it from the perspective of violation of human rights have been very few. While legal protestations and cases against works of fiction have not been many, such reactions against their film versions are a common phenomenon these days. This paper examines the role of films in translating violence from textual sources to the screen and its implications for human rights violations. By analyzing two Hindi films that portray domestic violence, the study aims to shed light on the intersection of cinema, violence, and human rights.

MULTIMODALITY IN FILM TEXTS:

There are different perspectives of studying a film and it includes the medium, inherent sign systems and the manifestations of text. According to Borstnar et al., (2002) films can be studied from different perspectives, the medium used (including multimodals), its inherent sign system and the text as it ‘appears’. As a medium, film can be interpreted as a system of processing of information and signs or symbols. As a sign system, films can be seen as a coherent whole comprising of elements that are interdependent. According to Bordwell and Thompson (1997), the relationships between the whole and the interdependent

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constituent elements are driven by formal and functional principles concerning narrative construction. The textual aspect of films or cinema attributes it to a particular cohesive and coherent formation of signs from the films, which are connected to each other by particular actualisation of the formal and functional principles, and which are produced and exhibited by and received through the medium of film. Some amount of texts are stated, sometimes quite bluntly by dialogues or portrayals, but a lot of it may remain latent – waiting for further interpretations. Film text comprises of other sign systems like language, visual communication, body language, kinesics or proxemics. In other words, film or cinema generally utilizes all sign systems. So, film text arises out of a consolidation of meaningful aspects of other elements which are already equipped with meaning by being part of the semiotic system. The film as a multimodal text, combines visual and verbal elements to convey a meaning. The relationship between these elements, guided by formal and functional principles, add to the overall importance of the film. A film consists of many layers of meaning which are conveyed through audio visual, hence it's a multimodal text. Film texts are understood as integrated textual constructs, which starts with the premise that parts interact and affect each other in the formation of the whole. Two types of semiotic codes will be understood, the verbal (for the present purposes, the sound-image correlation in a film text encompasses verbal) and the visual. The correlation will be understood and will contribute to the meaning of the film text.

The concept of “grammar of visual representation” is roughly expressed in representational, interactional and information-organisational meanings in texts. Since both visual communication and language express meaning, there is a degree of convergence between the two semiotic texts and systems. In other words, the premise is that it allows a correlation of meanings conveyed by linguistic structures and the meanings accomplished by visual structure with the perspective to overarching communicative functions they server (Baumgarten, 2005).

Two layers of information comprise a film text, visual information, and verbal information. Both these layers are important and are intertwined as the audience understands the film as a combination of both. In film, the linguistic reference to the extra linguistic position engulfing the encompassing the participants in the communicative process, provides two actions: one, it functions in creating a relatable real-life communicative encounter. It makes an object in the extralinguistic context, the topic of discourse. Secondly, it singles out elements for the audiences' attention. Multimodality therefore is the defining attribute of film texts. Both visual and verbal meanings can be understood as being placed parallel which are combined in a definitive manner to form one text (with multiple layers).

CONSTRUCTING CRIME AND JUSTICE ON

FILM:

Films often depict crime and justice in ways that may not accurately reflect reality. Media representations tend to emphasize predatory violence and revenge as dominant crime themes. The constant presence, or even expectation of revenge and a complete absence of restorative principles of justice from the cultural landscape reflects a trend of the media to conform to the belief that people have a basic need for justice in social exchanges (Darley & Pittman, 2003). According to Raney, (2005) research shows that audiences display an inclination for narratives that associates or links punishment with justice. Surette (2007) points out that media are a shared social space where people's attitudes, judgments are polished and mediated. The representation of violence in media can influence viewers to support conservative approaches to criminal justice or seek innovative resolutions.

Many researchers have articulated that films act as an important source of knowledge for crime and violence (Hickey,2006; Rafter,2006). This is based on the presupposition that audiences are “largely visual generation that more readily identify with images than printed text”, (Rothe and Ross, 2007)]. They are able to relate themselves more and readily with the film versions. Therefore, opinions and views of audiences about a storyline are formed by the visual culture. Diverse research throws light on the argument that media representation of violence can lead audiences to back or support conservative ways to criminal justice response (Surette, 1998; Weitzer& Kubrin 2004), or even look for innovative resolutions

MEDIA AND JUSTICE:

According to Coyne and Archer (2004) revenge and torture for wrongdoing and the link with law and justice are oft repeated narratives in films and television. Films like Whether it was the blockbuster Sholay (1975) or Karz (1980), Agneepath (1990) or Ghajini (2008) or the Zakhmi Aurat (1998) or Kahaani (2012) popularized vigilante heroism. In fact, retaliation by the victim has been construed as a populist form of justice, given its demand by the audiences (Philips & Strobl, 2006). Scholars like Katz (1987) have interpreted the act of suffering itself as a form of social practice where shared values and morals are considered to be communicated to the criminals or perpetrators restoring the natural social order.

The retaliation of the victims in Hindi cinema also includes women who become victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence has been on the rise every year. Gender based violence according to the World Development Report (2017) is a prevalent phenomena and is experienced by one in three women in their lifetimes. With the world dealing with the corona virus (COVID-19)

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and many countries including India being under complete lockdown, brought unintended negative consequences, domestic violence against women being one. According to the statistics shared by National Commission for Women (NCW) in India in April 2020 there has been a 100% increase in complaints relating to domestic violence against women after the lockdown.

Violence against women cuts across all ages, caste, social class, economic status, education levels, employment status and geographical regions (Bhat & Ullman, 2013). It is put forth by some that because commercial Hindi cinema objectifies women, those that consume this entertainment, regard as contributing to patriarchal and negative attitudes towards women (Manohar & Kline, 2014). In this reference it's important to understand how violence on women in films inform and shape perceptions and attitudes in individuals. Of the many forms of violence that we see in films that women face, domestic violence or violence by intimate partner is by far the most debilitating. According to Menjivar et al (2002), though marital violence is rampant across the world irrespective of any factors, it is normalized and legitimized in some communities or groups, "as an inherent part of their cultural repertoire". In a country like India, where family relations are driven and controlled by codes of patriarchy and family hierarchies, this is widely prevalent. Men within the framework of society and home still occupy the privileged position of power. The use of power which results in violence is justified as normal and part of the cultural milieu we are part of. Women are expected to tolerate in silence, as standing up or questioning is viewed as going against the social norms and if one does it comes with a price.

A lot of debate has been around domestic violence as shown in films. Such depictions in cinema influences both perpetrators and sufferers. They question how acceptable is it becoming or what the course of action or reaction should be. It is of great concern among activists, social scientists, filmmakers and feminist organizations. With the pandemic and lockdown underway many agencies have brought our attention to domestic violence within the four walls of the victims being locked inside their homes with abusive partners. We consider domestic violence as shown in two films and the victim as acted out by two iconic Bollywood actresses. The two films are *Daman (2001)* and *Mehendi (1998)*.

Daman (2001) is a film featuring a de-glamorized Raveena Tandon as the protagonist, Durga who is victimized by her husband - Sanjay Saikia (Sayaji Shinde), an educated, affluent tea state owner. The torture meted out to her by her husband leads her to a saturation point and then she is forced to take an extreme step.

Mehendi (1998) is a film starring Rani Mukherjee, who is tortured and beaten by her husband *Niranjan (Farhaaz Khan)* and in-laws for dowry. To save her husband she spends a night with a photographer as he had the evidence that will prove him innocent. She is then thrown out of her house, and a divorce petition follows. Finally, she takes her revenge against her in-laws and her husband by eliminating them one by one.

Both these films have the backdrop of traditional Indian marriage and constant traditional values are reinforced and observed. Any aspect of her demeanor that goes against the status quo is considered as a serious breach. Patriarchy expects her to conform to the ways of her new household and violence against her is considered normal.

To comprehend the nature of any act of violence or abuse, it is necessary to analyze the complexities in the life and character of the victimizer or abuser. This can be done in the light of two major theoretical approaches developed by researchers in the study of domestic violence – the family violence approach and the feminist approach. According to the family violence perspective, marital abuse is attributed to the character flaws of either of the spouses or the pressures that affect the family. Stacey and Shupe (1983), in their book, *The Family Secret: Domestic Violence in America*, observe that the character flaws could occur due to factors like violent socialization during childhood, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, extra-marital affairs or lack of self-control. The second approach, which is a feminist one, pinpoints the patriarchal values of society and the dominance of men in heterosexual relationships as the main reason for marital abuse. This approach attributes domestic violence to the "very same normative structure that defines women as inferior, reaffirms dominance and aggression as positive attributes in men, and under presents women in all spheres of social, economic and political life" (Abraham, "Ethnicity" 452-453).

A close look at the abusive spouses in the films mentioned is against the theoretical inferences, we see an overlapping of many of the factors highlighted in making the two characters what they are. Male superiority and patriarchal values is an accepted and common norm in the makeup of both the male protagonists in the respective films. If we look both the films closely with reference to some common parameters that stand out are, the theme within the film structure, the story and plot element, the issue of solving the issue.

The central theme within the film is the positioning of the good vs evil. The way the good vs evil is depicted in both the films, it's a divide between the genders. But how in both these films the protagonist is faced with the villainy of the man but is also able to resolve it with the support of a man. The films used the linear technique of narrative, and the narrative is seen through the women's perspective. And finally, the struggle between the man and the women and the society at large. Not only are the women mocked or subjugated by the society but finally she takes revenge and brings about a closure. The end of the cinematic narrative stands out and definitely has an effect or can be seen as a translated into the acceptable text of society. Taking law in their own hands,

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or revenge being the last resort. It is in this light that we need to understand the title of the paper, Translating violence from texts onto screen: violation of human rights.

According to Govt. of India (2005), "Domestic

Violence" is defined in The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (India, 2005) as "any act of commission or omission or conduct resulting in physical, verbal, emotional, sexual and economic abuse" and this can range from calling names, insulting, humiliating, controlling behaviour, physical violence to sexual violence." According to the Amnesty International, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in article 1: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Women are included in this brotherhood, yet they continue to be subjected to sexual and domestic violence by intimate partners and other relatives.

CONCLUSION

This research paper explores the translation of violence from textual sources to the screen and its implications for human rights violations, focusing on domestic violence in Hindi cinema. By analyzing the films "Daman" and "Mehendi," the study highlights the influence of cinema on societal perceptions and attitudes towards violence against women. The analysis of these films within the context of human rights provides valuable insights into the intersection of cinema, society, and gender issues.

Through a multimodal approach, considering both the visual and verbal elements of film texts, the research paper examines how cinematic representations contribute to the normalization of violence against women and the potential consequences for human rights. By recognizing the power of cinema as a medium and understanding its impact on viewers, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions on the role of media in promoting social change and advocating for gender equality and human rights.

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