

WOMAN CENTRIC HOLLYWOOD MOVIES AND HOW WOMEN'S PORTRAYAL HAS CHANGED IN RECENT TIMES

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of women in cinema, particularly in Hollywood, has always remained somewhat uniform since cinema took off. Women were almost unquestionably portrayed as being below men on the social totem pole; every woman character has been depicted as one dimensional in the sense that they always *need* a man to rescue them from their plight. Also, proper character development was not given to women and mostly it was their romantic sides that were given more attention in films.

Of course, this has changed in recent times. Although the change in mindset is still a work in progress, the world in general is moving towards accepting the fairer sex as being equal to their male counterparts. Naturally, this is something that is being reflected in modern cinema as well, with woman centric movies being well-received both critically and commercially. On the silver screen, women are no longer waiting for men to come and save them; they are strong, independent and as a result are able to save the world themselves.

That being said, there are still improvements that can be made in the way women are projected in cinema. Quite often, stereotypes are reinforced by depicting women characters in certain ways even in modern times, which is something that is counterproductive to the idea of gender equality.

Objectives of the study are to note how women are portrayed as leads in movies as well to chart the way their characters are now multi-dimensional. "Gone Girl", " Fargo", "She's The Man" and "Bend It Like Beckham" will be analyzed with the expected outcome of the study showing that while women are portrayed better, there is still a little place for improvement in this regard.

INTRODUCTION

Movies have been an important part of Western culture for decades now. Movies might be recreational in nature but there is no doubt in the fact that art does in fact imitate life and that movies, whilst also looking to provide an escape from reality

needed to be, to at least to some extent, rooted in reality. Films are therefore key in both influencing cultural change as well as documenting it in some manner.

Hollywood movies are no different. Watching movies from an era like the 50's or 60's is a vivid experience for a contemporary viewer simply because of the amount of change that society has undergone in all these years. Among one of the major changes that can be seen is the way women characters and actresses have broken away from the shackles imposed on them in older societies. Nowadays, it isn't uncommon to see a movie that is promoted as having the female character as the lead, with the narrative focusing on her. This is something that would have been unthinkable a few decades back yet it is happening now.

After all, movies centered on women were once considered to be niche entertainment; however, that is a mindset that is clearly shifting in modern times, at least amongst the viewers. Over the past decade itself, hit films with a female lead have grossed an average of \$126.1 million. During the same time period, hit films with a male lead have grossed an average of \$80.6 million. The box office success of movies that are based around a woman lead is certainly an indicator that a change in the way women are projected on screen is not just what's best for society but best for business as well. Remarkably, this change is something that didn't take place until around the dawn of the new millennium despite the feminist movement making waves from the era of the First World War and its significance only growing in the following decades.

A change in societal perception of women has definitely helped this change get reflected on the silver screen. While it would be inaccurate to say that gender equality is a full reality in the modern world, there can be no arguments about the fact that the situation of the fairer sex in today's world has improved a lot. There is, however, still some way to go in order to further change the way women are seen in movies.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are to chart the change in the manner in which women characters are portrayed in Hollywood movies that are centered around them as well as to analyze the growth of women actresses from portraying limited

characters to becoming multi-dimensional characters whilst also looking at the improvement that can be done in portraying them even better in the future.

HYPOTHESIS

The following is the hypothesis that of the study:

Women characters are now portrayed in a prominent manner in films that makes them compelling, multi-dimensional and relatable characters to the audience.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Behind the curtain: women's representations in contemporary Hollywood, Reema Dutt, London, England, 2013

Summary of the work: This paper looks to look at the messages passed around by three films, all of which were high-grossing: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows II*, *The Avengers* and *Toy Story 3* with regards to the way women are portrayed in Hollywood. This was done by analyzing two scenes from each film, three stills from each scene and for a total of eighteen film stills. Also analyzed were the first and final substantial scenes of the women protagonists in the movie.

Conclusion of the author: Through this study, the author comes to the conclusion that while women are not necessarily portrayed in a manner that is directly patriarchal. However, the images analyzed do have subtle signs of what society 'expects' from women. The author concludes by saying that more empirical studies like the one she has undertaken need to be done so as to take more steps forward.

Learning from the work: This paper confirmed my findings that while women are portrayed in a manner that isn't necessarily patriarchal, more work must be done in this field so as to ensure that women are portrayed better than what they are currently.

Grand Hotel: Portrayal of Women in Golden Age Hollywood, Dan Li, Texas, USA, 2014

Summary of the work: This paper looks to analyze the way female characters were portrayed in Golden Age Hollywood of the 1930's. This is done by analyzing the characters of the two female protagonists in the hit film *Grand Hotel* as well as

providing a historical context as to how women were first major players in mainstream Hollywood (writing scripts, directing, and acting) before being phased out when sound technology took over. The author maintains that it was at this time that the projection of female characters became more male-oriented.

Conclusion of the author: Female characters were portrayed in a manner that focused on their domesticity and romance because of a variety of reasons, most notably the diminishing influence of women as well as male audience psychological needs. The characters in the movie influenced women to think a certain way and fashion themselves on these characters. Plot lines that focused on women and their career, friendship etc. were not yet formed but were developing slowly.

Learning from the work: The reason this paper was studied was to determine how women were portrayed when Hollywood movies really took off as a cultural phenomenon. This was because a point of comparison was needed to identify the changes in the way women were portrayed. In earlier times, women characters were mainly projected as objects of male fantasy and little else. The forces of patriarchy were still very much a dominant external factor at the time.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to analyze the change in the way women are perceived in Hollywood, four movies that feature women as the lead role will be watched. These four movies are " Fargo", "Bend It Like Beckham", "She's The Man" and "Gone Girl". These movies have seen some levels of success in the box office and amongst critics. Furthermore, all of them are part of a different point in time over the last 20 years; ' Fargo' was released in 1996, 'Bend It Like Beckham' in 2002, 'She's The Man' in 2006 and 'Gone Girl' is the newest movie being analyzed and was released in 2014. These movies will be watched and their plotlines analyzed whilst also placing primary focus on how the women protagonists of the movie are depicted.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The movie ' Fargo' centers around a slew of murders that takes place on the roads of the city called Fargo. These murders are a result of a car salesman with money problems hiring goons to kidnap his wife so that he can demand a big ransom from his wealthy father-in-law. The main detective charged with investigating the

homicides is Detective Marge Gunderson. She does all the leg work of the case whilst being seven months pregnant whilst also being a supportive wife to her husband Norm.

This movie is a fine example of how to empower women without making it too obvious. Marge Gunderson is depicted as an extremely smart, no-nonsense detective whilst also being a loving wife. It doesn't have to be a choice for her; she willingly investigates the case whilst seven months pregnant and the physical discomfort she is in isn't something played on too heavily although it is mentioned now and again. The fact that she is able to balance a career and her home so well is an extremely positive thing and is a great way of showing to the world that women don't need to solely remain confined to the four walls of their home and neglect their careers, even during pregnancy.

'Bend It Like Beckham' is a movie that features a British-Indian lead character in Jess Bhamra. Set in west London, the movie follows the trials and tribulations of a girl who is madly in love with the sport of football (or soccer, as Americans would call it) and is an excellent player but her parents look to stop her from playing because of the fact that she's a girl. She still continues to play in secret and eventually joins a team that makes it to the top of the League. In between all this, she is forced to deal with issues with her best friend in the team, Jules. Both of them are into Joe, the coach of the team and their friendship unravels when Jules catches Joe and Jess in a moment of passion. Eventually they sort their issues whilst winning the League and earning scholarships to Santa Clara University.

The character of Jess Bhamra is seen as empowering women because not only does she manage to excel in a field like sports that has always been seen as male-dominated, but she also manages to subvert the patriarchal thinking of her parents (and her Indian society at large) as well as secure her future whilst doing so. Her dealing with issues of friendship and love make her seem more relatable because everyone at some point has had to deal with such problems in their lives. Although the movie is comedic in nature, it manages to send across a powerful message: your gender doesn't define what you can and cannot do.

'She's The Man' deals with a similar theme: the lead character, Viola Andrews, is passionate about soccer but when her high school cuts the girls' team, she has

nowhere to go. She tries to get permission to play for the boys' team but is denied. She then impersonates her twin brother who is in a rival school and joins the boys' team of that school, eventually making the first team. Hilarity ensues as she tries to juggle her dual life but her ruse is discovered eventually. She is allowed to play on anyway and goes on to score the winning goal in a game against her former high school.

The Shakespearean touch of women disguising themselves as men is a clever tone, but overreaching plotlines stop the movie being a proper success. Nevertheless, the character of Viola is portrayed as a smart young lady who knows exactly what she wants, and that's being a good soccer player. She does have to deal with issues (an annoying ex-boyfriend and a crush in the football team she develops whilst impersonating her brother) but these are issues everyone, not just women, have to deal with. Again, the message sent here is clear: just because she's a girl, it doesn't mean she should be discriminated against on the sports field.

'Gone Girl' is a psychological thriller that sees Amy Dunne, a once-wealthy woman pull off a disappearing act on her husband Nick Dunne on the day of their fifth wedding anniversary. Police begin to suspect the husband of being involved in her disappearance and a host of clues point towards the case being a clever murder. Eventually it is revealed that Amy is alive and well and the whole thing was a plan to get Nick convicted for her murder. This was because she knew he was having an affair and their marriage had disintegrated. Eventually the two reconcile and move back together.

The movie is both clever and thrilling, but it is hard to feel any sympathy for the woman once her plans keep getting revealed. At first one feels sorry for Amy but by the end we are left with two characters that are hard to relate to. The fact that the movie tends to reinforce gender stereotypes of women being 'crazy' doesn't help matters. Her character isn't given much depth and some viewers might actually feel more sympathy for the husband than her. That being said, the character of Amy Dunne is certainly a powerful one and the success of the film is down mostly to her.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The conclusion to be drawn from the above study is that women have indeed come a long way in terms of how they are portrayed in Hollywood movies. The fact that we can so easily find many movies that are centered around women is in itself a testament to that. But it must also be noted that merely making them the focus of these movies is not enough; their characters must be developed properly over the course of the movie and must be easy to relate to for an average viewer. This is something that has been happening in Hollywood movies over the last twenty years.

That being said, there is still room for improvement. As mentioned previously, 'Gone Girl' tended to reinforce some negative female stereotypes during the course of the movie, a fact not lost on movie critics. Alyssa Rosenberg of the Washington Post wrote that the character of Amy Dunne can be "accurately described as simultaneously misogynist and misandrist". Eliana Dockterman of Time wrote that 'Gone Girl' is both "a sexist portrayal of a crazy woman" and a "feminist manifesto", highlighting the duality of the movie.

So while portrayals of women in Hollywood have changed drastically, there is some way to go before women on the silver screen are fully empowered. Thankfully, the industry is moving in the right direction in this regard.

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