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A Feminist Reading of Sujoy Ghosh's Movie Kahaani (2012)

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Abstract

Feminism is a range of social movement, political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal and social equality of the sexes. Feminism incorporates the position that societies prioritize the male point of view and that women are treated unjustly within those societies. Efforts to change that include fighting against gender stereotype and establishing educational, professional, and interpersonal opportunities and outcomes for women that are equal to those for men.

Kahaani explores themes of feminism and motherhood in male-dominated Indian society. The film also makes several allusions to Satyajit Ray's films such as *Charulata*, *Aranyer Din Ratri*. No one doubts a pregnant woman, a man tells her but "no one fears a pregnant woman". She is often the only woman in the frame, even as the city prepares for Durga Puja, it ignores Vidya's efforts to find her missing husband, her efforts to fight evil on a small scale. She must move through the world as a woman, a wife, a mother, she is searching as a wife, but the world perceives her belly and only cares for that. Another important and interesting character Bob Biswas. As a man, Bob became very bitter, to the extent that killing people gave him pleasure. He would smile and walk with a gun attached to a silencer, searching for his new target.

Yet for all the layers of the twists and betrayals, the truth remains that Vidya is driven by love for her husband and child. Her search feels at times like a masculine story but her motivations, her experience are female.

Keywords: Feminism, ideologies, unjustly, gender stereotype motherhood, twists and betrayals.

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A Feminist Reading of Sujoy Ghosh's Movie *Kahaani* (2012)

Introduction

Women power is the first thought that comes to mind when one sees an anxious, pregnant but resolute woman head straight to the police station in Kolkata right after stepping off the airplane from London. While the expressions on her face show Desperation, her mannerisms- for instance, the ease with which she pulls her travelling bag - reflect her commitment and determination to achieve her goal. Her heavily pregnant body may speak of helplessness but she is wise enough to use it for her benefit. This is Vidya Balan (playing Vidya Bagchi) taking us through the gripping narrative of *Kahaani*, a film replete with twists and turns.

Directed and Co-produced by Sujoy Ghosh, *Kahaani* stars Balan, Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Parambrata Chatterjee in the lead roles. After a long time (or should we say finally?), we got a movie that broke all the stigmas associated with women's presence in Bollywood action films. Vidya Balan as Vidya Bagchi plays the lead role in the movie *Kahaani* (2012) breaking the typecast where a hero is the one performing hyper masculinity, complete with big biceps appeared performing daredevil.

In *Kahaani*, Vidya Balan breaks that stereotype and stands out as the actual heroine the male leads stood aside while Vidya blazed forward.

Where the plot of the movie is concerned an attack of poisonous gas in the Kolkata metro leaves hundred dead and sets a chain of events in motion. Vidya Bagchi, a pregnant software engineer, travels to India from London in search of her missing husband, Arnab Bagchi. Arnab came to India for his assignment with the national data centre (NDC) 2 years ago. For the first time 14 days, they talked daily on the phone and then without explanation his calls stopped. While she is searching for her lost husband, Balan is assisted by Satyoki (Rana) Sinha; a junior police officer.

Initially no records are found of Arnab landing in India but Vidya knew deep inside that something was wrong so she didn't give up and continued with the search for her husband. Satyoki (Rana) newly recruited cop goes out of his way to help Vidya in her quest to search for her husband. Soon, she finds that her husband looks like an ex-employee of NDC Milan Damji. Worried that this resemblance might have posed problems for her husband, Vidya soon realised that the matter is much more than what's Vidya on the surface. Moreover, the murder of every person who tried to help Vidya created a sense of fear in her. But she fought fearlessly for the sake of her unborn child and missing husband. Later the involvement of the intelligence department into the matter makes the entire story even more complicated and dense. Vidya's character defies the typical portrayal of women in Action Cinema no leather jackets no Garter holsters for guns and no skin tight pants.

But in the end with her courage and fearlessness Vidya makes everything crystal clear. The reveal was that Vidya had just padded her stomach to appear pregnant to throw off the people keeping an eye on her. What's more, turns out the identity of Arnab Bagchi as her husband was also a concoction in order to hunt down Milan Damji. This was the unpredictable mind- boggling part of the entire *Kahaani*. Till the end, the entire police force thought that they were using Vidya to reach Milan Damji, but actually they were the ones actually being used by Vidya as a puppet for her mission and made her successful in finding Milan Damji and taking him down.

Analysis

The piece of art is one of a kind and proves that a good storyline is enough to leave an imprint on the viewers rather than songs, item numbers, slapstick comedy, etc. The movie from the very starting grips you. Starting at a slow pace, the story gains momentum in the middle

and then sustains it till the very end. Vidya's character also defies the typical portrayal of women in Action Cinema.

Parambrata Chatterjee as a newly recruited cop goes out of his way to help Vidya Balan find her missing husband- the actor plays the reliable sidekick to perfection. Nawazuddin Siddiqui, as usual with his nuanced acting skills, he stood out in his part of a ruthless, emotionless cop who tries to convince Vidya to give up and go back. The movie is full of suspense, drama and thrilling elements and has been set in a mesmerising backdrop of Durga puja in Kolkata. The combination itself could bind its viewers till the end and jaw- dropping climax is (again) something that Bollywood thrillers often lack. Kahaani completely justifies its title and is so beautifully narrated with the viewers with its outstanding cast as the icing on the cake moreover the perfect shots of the beautiful city of Kolkata with each of its details and scenes is an aspect worthy of appreciation. It is actually a kind of movie which must be seen twice to get a clear picture of the minute events which weave this thrilling yet beautiful Kahaani.

Feminism is a social and political movement that advocates for the rights of women on the grounds of equality of sexes. It is not denying the biological differences between the sexes and demands equality in opportunities. It covers everything from social and political to economic arenas. In fact, feminist campaigns have been a crucial part of history in women empowerment. The feminist campaigns of the 20th century made the right to vote, public property, work and education possible. Feminism is not just important for women but for every sex, gender, caste, creed and more it empowers the people and society as a whole. A very common misconception is that only women can be feminists. It is absolutely wrong but feminism does not just benefit women. It strives for equality of the sexes not the superiority of women.

Feminism takes the gender roles which have been around for many years and tries to deconstruct them.

This allows people to live freely and empower lives without getting tired down by traditional restrictions. In other words, it benefits women as well as men. For instance, while it advocates that women must be free to earn it also advocates that why should men be the sole breadwinner of the family? It tries to give freedom to all. Most importantly it is essential for young people to get involved in the feminist movement. This way, we can achieve faster results. It is no less than a dream to live in a world full of equality. Thus we must all look at our own cultures and communities for making this dream a reality. We have not yet reached the result but we are on the journey, so we must continue on- this mission to achieve successful results. Feminism has had a life changing impact on everyone, especially women. If we look at history, we see that it is what gave women the right to vote. It was no small feat but was achieved successfully by women. Further, if we look at modern feminism, we see how feminism involves in life- altering campaign. For instance, companies that support the abortion of unwanted pregnancy and reproductive rights allow women to have freedom of choice. Moreover, feminism constantly questions patriarchy and stripes to renounce gender roles. It allows men to be whoever they wish to be without getting judged. It is not taboo for men to cry anymore because they must be allowed to express themselves freely.

Similarly, it also helps the LGBTQ community greatly as it advocates for their rights too. Feminism gives a place for everyone and it is best to practise intersectional feminism to understand everyone struggle.

The key message of feminism must be to highlight the choice in bringing personal meaning to feminism. It is to recognise others right for doing the same thing. The sad part is that despite feminism being a strong movement there are still parts of the world where

inequality and exploitation of women take places. Thus we must all try to practice intersectional Feminism.

A close reading of Kahaani demonstrates resistance against a normative culture and female subjugated identities. She is symbolic of collective consciousness and social awakening about smashing patriarchal structures uprising women. The emergent new women have refashioned motherhood and the strength she possesses. Although the initial characterization and Positionality of Vidya Bagchi situates her as “harmless” and “indeed of help”, it eventually eloquently displaced dynamism in redefining women- centric cinema, especially in urban and diasporic spaces, by emphasising paradigms shift from the chastised wife and villainous vamp portrayal that dominated cinema until the 1990s. Bagchi was there for conceptualised as the “new woman” who stood uninhibited by social norms and was not bowed down by domesticity. Instead, the narrative portrayed how Bagchi's exposure clear to the public world strengthened her to deal with his vagaries and offered a welcome respite from the painful women- victim sagas.

Finally, through Kahaani Bollywood earmarked the celebration of an autonomous and free-spirited women. At the same time, it was a family film of a different kind leaving people with many after thoughts for it put forth a mother - child relationship that was emotionally charged yet staged very differently from the typical motherhood narratives. It still put across an effective discourse about the sacred and profane where the mother settled her vendetta in the name of national security.

I investigate the multiple layers of Indian womanhood portrayed in Kahaani as her foundation is still rests on establishing a culture distinct from best westernised ideas. The charismatic portrayal of Bagchi staged an integral dialogue on Indian culture tradition identity and motherhood projected as empowering in the 21st century. Jyotika Viridi (2003) noted: women's roles, assigned in relation to the hero- is lover, mother, or the “other” woman- maintain the male protagonists centrality. But Kahaani was different from the usual gender tropes displayed on the screen. It established its prominence by constructing a women's identity as central in creating the narrative. Set at the backdrop of Calcutta, Kahaani challenges gender stereotypes and comforts them with the avenging women discourse. No more harmless and benigns, Vidya Bagchi debunks gender roles and patriarchal structures in the neoliberal space of Kolkata. She independently seeks revenge for her husband's death and infants lose. Her loss of family became her source of strength and she felt empowered only when she exulted her plans to confront the terrorist responsible for the attack. In the backdrop of durga puja celebration of the victory of good over evil, a fight for justice and dignity, Kahaani evoked the sentiments of challenging the deep- rooted masculine mistrust. The film was released on international Women's Day as a marker of women's strength and agency defying the stereotypical portrayal of gender roles and family cinema.

Vidya Balan has carved her niche for her choice of offbeat cinema and bold roles dressing the skewed gender economics, violence inflicted on women's bodies and struggles undertaken by them. Kahaani was one such rendition, a thriller that's set a toned for portraying Indian womanhood beyond the fragile display of emotions, helplessness and victimhood. Calcutta became Bagchi's space or rebirth and liberation that enable her to mask the identity as an “abandoned wife”. The film transcended the colonized calcutta's urban species and Bhadrak culture to show the emergence of a “new woman”. Vidya eulogised these sentiments of Goddess Durga and fought her battle independently tricking everyone to think of her as helpless and abandoned. Violence in her narrative was not evil/spiteful; Instead, it addressed and mothers's agony through a straightforward and compelling narrative with which the educated and urban audience could resonate. It drew attention towards the need for more high content films that move beyond portraying women as passive recipients of gaze, an eroticised

spectacle of voyeuristic pleasure but as active agents who could independently lead the narrative without a male counterpart. Historically Bollywood had enmeshed on representing an overly dramatic and emotional mother bowed down by social duties, love for family and kinship desires that suppressed their own individual desires, goal and ambitions. Kahaani put forth of women who did not succumb to patriarchal pressure or helplessly cry on her loss. Instead, she battled her challenges and was not scrutinised negatively. The post-2010 trend of women- centric and identity. It goes beyond viewing them as cultural spectacles of gaze, lust and tradition. Instead it also envisions them as active agents of social change. Bagchi challenges the pathos imagery of a childless mother and transcend into showcasing a technologically adept, bold, and mindful mother who outsmarts police officers to get her way through. Kolkata, the city of joy became a space of discovering the newfound self who unhesitatingly traversed in its dangerous paths despite numerous warnings.

Mapping the city and the film's narrative also holds symbolic value for Bagchi's journey as she was the 21st century woman who strategized revenge for having lost her family. Her profession as a software engineer who could easily access confidential government records and files held relevance in the framing and characterisation of her womanhood. It is still a largely male- dominated skill and profession in India. Her diasporic identity and disillusionment on coming from London helped her gain sympathy in the eyes of the police officers, which worked as per her plan. Kahaani put forth an impoverishing and realistic story from the diary of a modern woman who is struggle to find her way through the city. Set at the backdrop of women playing sindur, khela ulu, dhaak and dhunuchi naach, Vidya's character challenged the damsel in distress eulogy and advocated the narrative of a woman who championed the power to fight demons. Calcutta's much awaited Durga puja holds symbolic value, especially in its last few scenes. Dressed in a traditional red-bordered white saree, Vidya made her way through the congested streets where people gathered for the puja procession. On confronting the terrorists (Millan Damji) alone, she gained inner strength, valour, and confidence not to shed a tear. Her prosthetic belly was her ruse that protected her from being attacked. She flung it on Damji's face when he kicked her belly to push her away. Bagchi's display of motherhood all along was shown as an amalgamation of loss, pain and agony of not being able to experience the journey of motherhood. In India women's identity is intrinsically linked to maternity and Bagchi's loss was reflected in the strength she derived from killing Damji. Draping a saree for the first time she portrayed an avatar of the goddess Durga on the last day of Durga puja festivities her revenge was personal and displayed the agony of a mother who lost her child and husband, and only after she succeeded in attaining justice could she mourn their death.

Conclusion

Kahaani represented the flashback of her guilt for coaxing her husband to take up the project. At the same time, he was reluctant to leave her alone in the last few months of pregnancy. She was fully cognizant of her decision and despite breaching the law, Bagchi was not demonised. Instead, Bagchi had been placed on pedestal for having successfully transgressed from the stereotypical motherhood performances in Bollywood in the yesteryear by exercising sovereign powers. She continues to uphold the virtues of patriarchy and embodies goddess Durga for the communal good in her quest for justice.

Kahaani may not have been a stereotypical portrayal of motherhood in India. Still, I eulogize the sentiments of a mother who fights for justice and takes up the mission as an intelligence officer who confronts her husband's murderer. She might be held technically guilty by law and therefore a villain, but Bagchi was portrayed in the divine light for being a goddess. Additionally, she portrayed that a symbol of tradition is not necessarily an *abla naari* (helpless women) but one who exhibits rationality and pragmatism in confronting unforeseen problems.

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