

A Gendered Reading of *Rocky aur Rani kii Prem Kahaani*

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ABSTRACT

Loosely adapted from Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man*, the film 'Rocky aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani' seeks to vocalize problematic aspects of Indian society and enables a conversation on hitherto silenced and taboo topics. In the process, though, it presents perspectives that are riddled with problems. This paper examines some changing cultural patterns and their representation, questioning the film's portrayal of patriarchy, gender stereotyping and misogyny. While the film does interrogate the condescending arrogance of the educated elite and critiques feministic dogmatism as well as misogyny, it fails to balance the presence and participation of women in the private and the public spheres. This analysis highlights issues which are otherwise glossed over by popular perception.

Keywords: *gender stereotyping and patriarchy, misogyny, feministic dogmatism, the private and the private spheres*

Introduction

The struggle for feminists has always been the misogynistic perspective that it is only the men who dominate the public sphere (associated with a career or work per se and activities related to business) and that the women are the ones who must be relegated to the private sphere which is usually associated with the home or the domestic sphere. The complete separation of the private and the public spheres is thus a highly problematic one which is seen as both hierarchical and patriarchal. Perpetuating this dichotomy only serves to further establish the patriarchal system thus ensuring the oppression and subjugation of women.

This paper investigates how this divide is preserved and problematically so, by Karan Johar's *Rocky aur Rani kii Prem Kahaani*. Cinema, especially popular cinema (as a distinct genre that operates in a domain that is very different from off-beat films that cater to a niche audience) perpetuates certain misogynistic perceptions, biases and prejudices. Even when a film is purportedly attempting to debunk myths that surround masculinity, it ends up doing things that contradict its very motive. If the director of *Rocky aur Rani kii Prem Kahaani* wanted to sensitively portray a soft masculinity in Rocky Randhawa's character, he fails miserably.

Contesting Masculinities

When an individual is truly free, as a member of the family, in a domestic space that primarily constitutes the private sphere of the home, a person would have rights of their own. In the film, however, every individual in Rocky's home is shown to be a slave to the mistress of the household, Dhanalakshmi Randhawa. Rocky's father, Tijori, is petrified of his mother and obeys her word as if it were law. The daughter in law is taunted by Dhanalakshmi at every available opportunity and her granddaughter is subjected to humiliation several times with her brother, Rocky, who otherwise, very supportive of her, is blind to what is going on in front of him. He is not only shown to be unaware of attempts at blatant body shaming that happen every time a groom comes to "see" her but actively participates in the humiliating conversations that ensue. It is only when Rani enters the household that resistance is attempted, and individual liberties are asserted by both Rocky's sister and mother. Another episode that comes to mind is the scene where Rocky points out that Rani's act of "checking him out" would have been misconstrued as objectification and commodification if it was a male sizing a woman up. This is one of the greatest redeeming qualities of the film.

R.W. Connell’s classification of masculinities can be usefully applied to this film. Tijori Randhawa, Rocky’s father, represents ‘an Indian version’ of “hegemonic masculinity” in that he occupies the position of a male who is the most powerful in the Randhawa family and dominates the women but is still subservient to his mother. He is the only male who was not mothered in such a way as to reinforce the conventional, gendered division of labour as his mother, Dhanalakshmi Randhawa is quite the focused businesswoman who ran a very tight ship and literally nursed a sick unit back into a profitable venture. However, the successful entrepreneur is also the source of all the conflict in the film – she is the biggest obstacle in the path of Rocky and Rani realizing their romance, the villain. She is the intimidating matriarch who dictates how not just the business but also how the household should run. Rocky and his father unconsciously join her to form a triad that is complicit in their intimidation of Rocky’s mother (Punam Randhawa) and sister (Gayatri Randhawa), thus also representing “complicit masculinity”.

Tijori Randhawa also exhibits an admiration and adoration of the mother figure in the unquestioning obedience he practices with his mother’s commands. At a simple nudge from her, he interrupts a conversation with his father and abandons all relations with the man, even though he is secretly shown nursing a desire to bond with his father. Kanwal Lund, Tijori’s father, fits into Connell’s paradigm of the “marginalized masculinity” and that is also where the problem lies. The film seems to reinforce the idea that a *shayar* or one who loves *shayari* and poetry in general, representing art and literature, does not generate the alpha-male masculinity that seems to be desired by Indian hetero-normative societies. Implying that art and literature is useless and that a masculinity that expresses an interest in these is also by implication, redundant and insignificant in a patriarchal society. Another character, though minor, who represents a “marginalized masculinity” is that of Shomen, who is hopelessly in

love with Rani but whom she does not see as “masculine” enough for her and therefore rejected multiple times, even insensitively humiliated in several scenes. There are several scenes in the film that highlight this. One of them is the scene where Rani is shown hugging Shomen to check if she experiences the same chemistry as the one, she felt while engaging in a “jhappi” with Rocky. Another is when Rani sidelines him in front of the family devoting all her attention towards Rocky.

Dance and Gender

The fact that the film is loosely adapted from and inspired by Mahesh Dattani’s play, *Dance Like a Man* emerges as soon as Tota Roy Chowdhury who plays Rani’s father, Chandon Chatterjee, in the film, narrates his backstory. He is a dancer who was mistreated as a child by his abusive father. Although this is revealed a while after the film opens, this forms one of the most important themes and plot points of the narrative. Dance and gender are firmly intertwined in the film along a continuum of masculinities that has the stereotypical virility of the Punjabi Masculinity on one end (represented by Rocky) and the soft, artistic, cultured masculinity of the Bengali *Bhadralok* (represented by Chandon Chatterjee) on the other. If one were to assess both these extremes one realizes that the film effectively conveys the need to re-articulate and reconstruct masculinities without polarizing extremes, calling for a balance but not really achieving it by the end of the film.

Rocky becomes Chandon Chatterjee’s disciple, and both unite over dance and transform the stereotypical dynamic of the father-in-law and son-in-law into something healthier and heartwarming. The central role played by dance in the film’s narrative, the reference to the Halwai family and the depiction of the traditional elite Indian Hindu family are the three pivotal similarities between Dattani’s play and the film taken up for consideration here. But the nod to

Dattani's play seems to end there. Dattani's play explores gender and sexuality very differently and in a far more nuanced manner.

The film does celebrate the bond between two unlikely representatives of masculinities over dance and makes the contrast between two Indian Hindu families stark and visible. Although guilty of essentialism (the film only considers elitist and wealthy people represented by Rocky and Rani's families), it does present two opposites within this elitist realm. One which has a truly liberal attitude to gender and sexuality (Rani's family) and another which does not (Rocky's family). Rocky himself is unaware of this and is made to realize this systematically in the film when Rani and Rocky exchange homes for a time. Rocky is indoctrinated in the art of making coffee for himself and Rani's family, helping them with chores such as drying the laundry but not without being sniggered at condescendingly by the Bengali Bhadrakok represented by the arty coterie that meets up in the Chatterjee household periodically.

Dattani's play critiques the perception of dance in a typical Indian Hindu family in a far more nuanced, historicized and interesting manner. Amritlal keeps threatening to throw Jairaj out of his house underscoring his economic dependence. Tellingly, Rocky wears his hair long throughout the film something that Jairaj struggles with, in the play riled by his father, Amritlal's taunts. The psychological nature of the abuse that Jairaj suffers at the hands of Amritlal may be seen as similar to the fear that envelops Rocky each time, he is caught dancing by his father and his grandmother. His character development is complete when he not only overcomes this fear but also distinguishes the feeling of respect from the instinct of fear.

The postures, movements, dress, adornments as well as the facial expressions on Rocky's face as he dances with abandon to the tune of *Dola re Dola*, evoke a feeling of disgust in his father and grandmother. They loathe him for having allowed his Punjabi masculinity to be influenced

by the “effeminate” Chandon Chatterjee, who had been made the butt of ridicule quite consciously by the Randhawa matriarch. She had egged him on to perform in a deceitful manner in front of a predominantly Punjabi audience that would never appreciate a man performing a classical routine. Chandon is humiliated by an audience that audibly guffaws and titters at the sight. He realizes, rather belatedly, that he has been mocked. Clearly, Karan Johar scores here. One must acknowledge that dance has been projected magnificently as a medium that strikes a balance between polarities and questions socially constructed gender roles.

Polarization of the Private and the Public and Trivialization of Infidelity

The film’s polarized portrayal of its inhabitants of the private and public spheres is equally problematic, if not more. It is only the men who are shown to be actively engaged in the public sphere demonstrated in the film through office spaces and boardroom meetings. The women, when they figure there, are presented only as if these were exercises in tokenism and the lone aggressively career oriented woman of the film, Dhanalakshmi Randhawa, played by Jaya Bachchan is villainized.

Dhanalakshmi is the head of the Randhawa household in the film. She is shown as a domineering wife who separates the artistic poetry-lover father figure (Kanwal Lund, a role played by the yesteryear romantic hero, Dharmendra) from his son. She wants to prevent her son, Tijori’s masculinity from being influenced by the artistic tendencies of his father. Thus, the father-child relationship is vitiated. The husband and wife’s relationship within the family is also destroyed as she takes over the sweet shop and the reins of the household by sidelining Kanwal Lund entirely. The husband is shown finding the love of his life at a Poetry Conference, a Kavi Sammelan, where he meets Rani’s Thakuma or grandmother, Jamini Chatterjee, a role essayed impeccably by Shabana Azmi.

Rani's Thakuma (grandmother) is also shown as a character with the backstory of having coped silently with domestic abuse from her husband. Jamini Chatterjee finds solace in her relationship with Kanwal Lund, the poet and shaayari enthusiast and yet, both decide to separate after a blissful week of togetherness, not wanting to threaten their respective private spheres and married life. An extra marital affair that has been relegated to the recesses of nostalgia surfaces only when Kanwal Lund mistakes another lady for Jamini at a public function and kisses her.

In what can only be called a trivialization of infidelity in the form of an extra marital romance, the wheelchair bound grandfather suddenly breaks into song and dance. He is abruptly shown forsaking the wheelchair he was dependent on all along up to this point in the movie, when Rocky and Rani facilitate surreptitious meetings between Jamini and Kanwal. Bordering on the ludicrous, the film recycles old Bollywood numbers to recreate the nostalgia of their romantic fling. One wonders if the same kind of behaviour would have been so casually handled if Dhanalakshmi Randhawa were guilty of such an extra marital affair. Why should a male be allowed the privilege of being excused from the moral obligations of a marriage and why should a grandson or a granddaughter not even bat an eyelid before encouraging their grandparents to relive an extra-marital fling? While one is not advocating prudery here, one is certainly questioning whether this would have been allowed if the character were a woman as well?

Heteronormative Essentialism

Dhanalakshmi's household is terrified of her. Everyone quietly "suffers" from her villainous and tyrannical rule. In what can only be called an instance of heteronormative essentialism, the stereotypical image of the woman as a caregiver, nurturer and maternal figure has been replaced by a narcissistic, scheming and self-absorbed businesswoman in Dhanalakshmi Randhawa. It

is as if the director wanted to perpetuate the conservative, heteronormative idea that a woman's place is in the home and not in a business establishment. Why does this have to be depicted in such an extreme manner? Can a career-oriented woman not enjoy her stint in the public sphere while balancing her role as a caregiver and maternal figure? Why must she be villainized as an evil matriarch who is completely transactional in her relationships? Dhanalakshmi Randhawa is represented as the only woman in a boardroom filled with men who are wondering what should be done to avert the crisis created by a sexist advertisement that refused to change with the times. She is shown as completely clueless, as a member of the Board of Directors who cannot fathom that something is amiss with the advertisement.

The titular character and Rocky's ladylove is presented in an equally problematic manner. Rani played by Alia Bhatt, is only shown hovering over superficially and dramatically on air as a TV show anchor. Her fame as an anchor is something that is told and never really shown. Media as a domain is celebrated as an emancipating agency in the film, channelizing the untapped talent of Rocky's mother in a reality show meant for housewives and mothers. Yet, Rani herself is never really shown seriously grappling with challenges at work. She is only seen dramatically sniggering in annoyance and losing her cool in a most unprofessional manner on air while interviewing a misogynistic politician. The MP pouts platitudes about women and blatantly justifies a heinous crime such as rape, which results in Rani abusing him in the choicest language on camera. As the director screams "Cut" the curtain falls not only on that episode but also on Rani's presence in the public sphere as far as the film is concerned. The only other footage in the film of Rani in her workspace depicts her checking Rocky's physique out or her cutting short an important assignment in Kashmir, because she has had an epiphanic moment that Rocky is the love of her life. She is shown flying back to her love summarily abandoning her professional responsibilities. The media as a domain, a most unequal playing field, that

could have been explored in a deeper fashion by exposing the mediatization of politics as well as the gender disparity in the media as a profession, has been sidelined in favour of objectification and tokenism. This brings Laura Mulvey's observations to mind, where she notes how cinema objectifies women:

... cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged. (Mulvey. 372-73)

Chandon Chatterjee's, wife, Anjali Chatterjee, is apparently the one inhabiting the public sphere as a teacher. However, and this is where the film fails, she is never shown within the domain of the public sphere. She is instead, presented in a stereotypical manner and caricatured for her use of academic English. If one of the goals the director has in mind is consciousness-raising, then it need not be one-sided. Why must Anjali Chatterjee be shown taking a step that is not only improbable but also ridiculous? She is shown dragging her "guest" and prospective "son-in-law" to a store for a lingerie shopping experience. Which shopkeeper would use a male who has accompanied his client as a mannequin? Does the director want his audience to assume that this is a ploy by Anjali Chatterjee that has been planned well in advance? Does he want to imply that the shopkeeper has been roped in by her with a scripted lesson to be imparted to Rocky when they arrive to "shop"?

Conclusion

This kind of an analysis may destroy pleasure, but it is a necessary critique for viewers to make them conscious of patriarchal society and its hegemonic manifestations that may not otherwise be apparent to a mainstream audience. Increasingly, popular films are portraying a peculiar

type of hyper masculinity that is visibly disturbing in films such as *Animal*, *Jawan* or *Rocky aur Rani kii Prem Kahaani*. The body image is one that advocates a macho man rippling with muscles and one who is insensitive to emotions. If *Animal* and *Jawan* show aggression and heartless violence, Rocky Randhawa internalizes the misogyny practiced by his family as they body shame Gayatri aka Golu and humiliate her innumerable times in front of potential grooms and their families. In lines that reveal his complicity Rocky is shown suggesting diets that she can follow to get back into shape. Punam Randhawa (Rocky's mother) and Gayatri Randhawa (Golu, Rocky's sister) are shown gorging on cake at night in the stereotypical space and haven reserved for women in all patriarchal homes - the kitchen. The film does try to salvage matters towards the end in Punam's refusal to accept the apology her husband, Tijori, offers but the damage is done and irreparably so, by the end of the film, as she is shown saying too little too late. Apart from the problematic portrayal of the private public dichotomy, the movie also trivializes education. One of the deep-seated issues Rani has about allowing herself to be attracted to Rocky is the fact that he is not educated enough. How can Rani marry someone who has bought himself a grade card using his father's influence? The director is guilty of trivializing academic rigour using caricature in the depiction of an academician in Anjali Chatterjee and irresponsible statements such as the one made by Rocky about purchasing a degree.

Similarly, if one of the director's aims in making the film is to put issues that are never discussed openly on to the conversation table, then why is there no talk amongst the characters when it comes to the extremely polarized hegemonic binary that is practiced in the scene where Rani raises her hand to stop Tijori from slapping her? Why must this be handled in a stereotypically patriarchal manner with Rocky questioning her for daring to intervene and raise her hand disrespectfully against his father. The problem here is the film perpetuates the stereotype it sets

out to break. No one understands or even tries to understand that Rani has every right to defend herself from a stinging slap that was coming her way by raising her hand in objection and defense. It is all right for an Indian male to display anger publicly. But if a woman, and a younger woman at that, raises her voice, even if it is to stand up for what is right, she must be conscious of her tone and how her tone may be perceived by those around her. Rani has no one to stand up for her. Her father, mother and grandmother only reinforce patriarchal constructs that have been socially conditioned since times immemorial.

If one of the cultural values imbibed in us, as Indians, is to respect one's elders, another is that associated with "hospitality". *Atithi Devo Bhava* has been instilled in every Indian household. Why is it okay to humiliate one's house guest publicly in a lingerie store by being made to play a mannequin for displaying bras? If an Indian male can be educated about equal division of labour in the domestic sphere of the home, by asking him to make his own coffee, he can also be trained to understand that a woman can manifest anger in her gestures and tone just as a man can. Why is there no attempt made to rationalize and point the injustice of the scene out? Why is there no lesson in civility or mutual respect? The film ends up valourizing the very formative external structures of patriarchal hegemony that work within limiting binaries. This paper thus attempts to break down these structures that manifest themselves in a "triple gaze":

...that of the camera as it records the profilmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion (Mulvey, 1975).

These manifestations are at work every time Rani lets herself be objectified on screen. The woman as object works on two levels: "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (Mulvey, 1975). The woman's

personhood is entirely negated, and she is either objectified, villainized or depicted as an incompetent professional given to emotional outbursts.

The film ends up reinforcing the existing hegemonies that revolve around the exhibition of disrespect. A father can disrespect a woman and a would-be daughter in law, publicly by raising his hand to hit her when she dares to raise her voice against an injustice. However, a woman cannot raise her hand to prevent herself from being slapped. Self-defence will continue to be perceived as an insult to the patriarchal hegemony that will continue if filmmakers such as Karan Johar do not facilitate a dialogue about it on screen amongst characters. Instead, Rani is shown accepting Tijori's and Rocky's apology thus ensuring that this kind of hegemony continues to rule roost. Heteronormative essentialism such as this will only contribute to perpetuating gender stereotypes, unless critiqued and called out for what they are- misogynistic narratives by influencers that suggest that women should continue to be treated as less than men.

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