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(Re) presentation of Gender Binaries in a Consumerist World: A Study of “Cheer girls” and
“*Chak de girls*”

Abstract

This article attempts to focus its discussion around the expression of gender binaries used in a consumerist world to gain profit by knowing the fact that how the concept of gender and sex is mixed in a patriarchal society. As gender is the social and cultural conditioning of the sex, Simone de Beauvoir, the author of *The Second Sex* and one of the most influential feminists of the early 20th century rightly stated “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (293). In a patriarchal society, there is always a narrative to construct gender binaries in order to produce the ‘inferior other’ – where man/patriarch is in the centre and woman is at the margins of this type of society as her story revolves around the centre - (his)story and eventually gets documented as history. Therefore, gender stereotypes have

existed since pre-historic times as myths or facts, across all cultures and places, but with the advent of late modernity the difference in their modes of representation have undergone change in the dynamics of power relations. As in this age of consumerism the representation of ‘women body’ and attention to ‘women beauty’ is sold and marketed as a commodity by the market forces.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Consumerism, Cheer girls, *Chak de girls*.

Gender stereotypes are very much strong in India. The social conditioning of male sex is done in a glorifying way right from the beginning that effects it positively whereas on the contrary, the fairer sex is right from its origin assumed to be subsidiary, subservient and besides this, wherever it is glorified it negatively effects the same by getting itself trapped in the midst of the misconceptions set up by the patriarchy. For e.g. - ‘glorification of motherhood in an Indian society’. Mother is supposed to be very sacrificing and this is believed to be a god-gift which ultimately renders a mother with certain involuntary compulsions. As Marion Reid argues in her essay ‘A Plea for Women’, which has been described as the most significant statement by a woman since Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, “if women’s rights are not the same as those of man, what are they?” (Walters 42). Reid rightfully questions why only women should be limited to the upbringing of children and other household chores when it is in the interest of both the wife and husband.

The tradition of ‘*Shakti puja*’ is very prominent in India, usually most of the men worship the idols of goddess *Durga*, *Kali* & *Saraswati* in the temples but on the contrary very few of them treats the so called incarnations of *devi*, i.e., their daughter, mother, wife, colleague or broadly the other fellow being – the women respectfully or as a fellow human being in the spirit of egalitarian camaraderie. Fiona Tolan rightly interprets in

Literary Theory and Criticism, “Even when worshipped and adored, they have had no autonomy and received no recognition as rational individuals, any more than when they have been abused and denigrated” (320-321).

In this age of consumerism, the market forces exploits the ‘stereotyped gender-ed communities’ to obtain the optimum profit. The usage of gender as ‘gender-ed’ is deliberately done to highlight prominently the manipulation done by the patriarchy as its editor. Because whatever suits to patriarchy is always included and transferred to newer generations through the institutions of *samskara* (which is itself an abstract concept like God) and the rest is simply deleted from the context.

“Cheer girls” (in the Indian Premier League IPL) and “*Chak de girls*” (in the movie *Chak De! India*)

In this post-modern globalised society, sports which earlier used to be restricted with the national esteem & pride seems to be adapted liberally across the globe for their sheer entertainment value. This can be understood with the emergence of Football Clubs & Cricket Leagues where players across the world are auctioned and sold, where players of the Football crazy nation like Brazil instead of playing for their South American Clubs had agreements with the European Clubs. As IPL (Indian Premier League) is created on the lines of the Football Clubs, similarly in Cricket too the Britons, Oz’s, Kiwi’s, Proteas, Sri Lankans, West Indians & players from other countries are playing in IPL with the Indian players. Many of them are even eager to quit their respective national teams simply in order to play for their franchise teams/league teams only because they get a good economic solidarity for life. In short, this shows the maturity & broad mindedness of the general public when it comes to sports as the concepts of patriotism and nationalism which got attached to sports after the emergence of

nation-state as a result of the treaty of Westphalia have got deconstructed but on the contrary, when it comes to women, why the attitude of the society remains unchanged?

As in the IPL the role of women seems to be very critically marginalised. They are not the team owners (where they are present they are subdued under the glimpse of their male counterparts usually their husbands, boyfriends, or friends. For e.g. Tina Ambani recognised as the wife of Mukesh Ambani; Shilpa Shetty and Preity Zinta who have established themselves by the virtue of their hard work in the Bollywood, even they are not recognised individually but as wife of Raj Kundra, and as girl friend of Ness Wadia respectively). This aptly connects with what Mary Wollstonecraft said in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* “It is a melancholy truth; yet such is the blessed effect of civilization! The most respectable women are the most oppressed” (287).

Besides players, the coaches, team management, supporting staff (Physiotherapist, Doctor, Trainer, Psychiatrist), commentators, etc. are all males. Even the organizers of IPL are all males, not a single woman is given representation as the organizers of the IPL. In this sense the whole of IPL is male-centric, they are the subjects around which this whole event evolve & revolves. In the language of chemistry, while all the elements be it reactants or final products in this event are male, women are its by-product.

The status of women in the IPL is reduced to subaltern groups as their role is restricted only to a common noun, i.e., “cheer girls”. While in the organisation of this IPL event all the names of male participation right from the pitch curator to the organizers and broadcasters all have got a specific name (a personal noun) whereas in case of the only prominent women presentation, i.e., the “cheer girls”, the individual independent identity of its members is absent and is reduced to a common noun. In this way they are lost, their whole identity is put at stake by the stakeholders of the IPL and the consumerist

market forces who are predominantly patriarchal. As the identity of an individual is affected by the respective history and culture of whom S(he) is a part, thus: “It is something-not more a trick imagination. It has its histories and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects . . . It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myths” (Hall 257).

The only public role allocated to women in the IPL appears to be a symbol of stupidity where the ‘cheer girls’ are destined to dance irrationally on a every six, four, or a fall of a wicket. As writes Eleanor Flexner about the contribution of Mary Wollstonecraft: “She is intent on removing the stigma attaching to woman--any and all woman--as creatures of instinct and feeling, devoid of intellectual powers or the capacity for intellectual growth” (149). Simone de Beauvoir argued this very fact of inferior representation of women by giving logical arguments that as such there was no physical or psychological reason as to why women should be considered lesser to men, but still women had always been presented as the inferior other of men across the world and various cultures. Simone de Beauvoir beautifully explains in her seminal book *The Second Sex* as how in the human thought the subject race/class/gender establishes itself as dominant to an object race/class/gender by creating binary oppositions:

The category of Other is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies; this division did not always fall into the category of the division of the sexes, it was not based on any empirical given. . . . No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself. (6-7)

The ‘cheer girls’ don’t sing (it can be interpreted as a symbol that they have no voice, no choice of their own) but only dance at beats of the drums (it can be interpreted as a symbol of exploitation of women at the hands of patriarchal society where the rules are

set up by the male gender and women made to follow it up sometimes forcefully and sometimes manipulatively). This can be expressed in terms of Foucault's 'Theory of Power' in his *The History of Sexuality* where Foucault claims sexuality: ". . . as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women . . . Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality"(103). Foucault's significance lies in his view that not only the discourse of sexuality concerns the operation of power in human relationships but also it regulates the construction of an individual identity. Therefore, it appears to be highly paradoxical in such a big event which is promptly covered by media, where on one side the players breaks the shackles of rigid nationalism, and transgress their nation boundaries whereas on the other side the role assigned to women is stereotyped as they are represented in a disgraceful way and also portrayed as irrational 'objects'.

However, the organizers of the event would argue that "Cheer girls" are there to entertain the spectators. But then the question arises that why are the cheer girls dancing in skimpy outfits, and to entertain which spectators? - masculine or feminine? Clearly the answer in accordance with the embedded patriarchal psyche of the IPL organizers would be to entertain the male spectators because they very well know that not all women in the spectators would be lesbian! How can be the organizers so biased with respect to the spectators too? Whether it be male or female spectators all loosens their wallet equally to get a seat. If analysing on parallel planes the concept of added entertainment provided via 'cheer girls' by the IPL organizers, the question arises that if there are cheer girls to entertain the male spectators then why the IPL organizers had not opted for 'cheer boys' to entertain the female spectators who are paying the equal amount of fee. This corresponds to the liberal 'equality feminism' adherent to American feminist Betty Friedan who articulated

the powerful slogans like ‘Equal pay for equal work’ and here it can be transposed as ‘Equal entertainment for equal fee’.

The concept of “Cheer girls” (represented as the symbols of feelings of cheer, mirth, pleasure hence the name cheer girls) in IPL is developed by its organizers keeping in view the large population of “stereotyped gender-ed communities”. In this age of consumerism where consumer is the boss of the market economy, the cheer girls who keep on jumping and dancing on the beats weirdly with their glossy make up & skimpy outfits that exposes most of their body are presented as mere ‘objects’ to serve the male consumers in the form of spectators. It correlates to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* where she has given a detailed explanation on account of gender stereotyping and division throughout history by analysing the metaphors and symbols of anatomical, psychological, political, historical, & cultural narratives for women that has artificially reduced them to as second and inferior sex.

However, most of the spectators are not offended rather bored by ‘cheer girls’. In any thrilling context, many cricket fans would be happy to see the camera focused on the real action in the middle of the ground instead of bringing cheer girls in between. Their twists and moves add nothing extra to an exciting sporting adrenaline booster! It is simply an example of the commercial modernity that intrudes our lives. Just like a market product the sole choice to watch the cheer girls or to watch the action replay lies with the spectators. And yet despite its huge media coverage no government organisations or NGO’s procuring gender sensitization and women welfare had ever posed a serious resistance to this frivolous fun of feminine gender.

However, when it comes to ‘*Chak de girls*’ from the Shah Rukh Khan starrer movie *Chak de!* India, the metaphors and symbols implied in it make an adequate endeavour to address the gender, religion, & regional stereotypes respectively in the context of India. The

film noticeably tries to break the gender stereotypes as the women walks out of their homes, beats up men who harass them in public, and declines marriage proposals -- all for hockey, the game they like (raise their voice for their choice).

The movie shows how nationalism is connected with Men's Hockey team where a player Kabir Khan (SRK) is declared a traitor by media & public on the grounds of losing a penalty shoot and because of him being a muslim whereas in the same sport the members of the Indian Hockey Association lacks enthusiasm and are insincere in their disposal of duties to find sponsors, financial aid and coach for the team as they consider the players of the Indian Women's Hockey World Cup team as timid who are used to deal with *chakla & balon* and hence, incapable to win; and even media remains ignorant about this. Moreover, when Kabir Khan, a former Indian men's hockey player wants to be the coach of this team, he is also discouraged at the very outset by the all Board members of the association including the single women member, who too is sceptic about the capabilities of the women players.

As every member in the Indian Women Hockey team has a story of her own fight with the gender stereotypes, the movie shows the gender biases prevalent in the society and attempts to address them positively. Through the struggles of Vidya Sharma (a married woman who chooses to continue with her first love, i.e., Hockey, even after her marriage and refuses to quit the practice camp to attend a wedding on the insistence of her husband and father-in-law), Komal Chautala (from Haryana who walks out of her village against the will of her parents to pursue her dream to play for the Indian national team), Preity Sabarwal (from Chandigarh who does not get influenced by the stereotyped advice of her boyfriend Abhimanyu Singh, Vice Captain of the Indian cricket team who asks her to quit the game of hockey as he considers it to be a stupid game and rather names it as *gulli-danda*). This can be linked to the famous statement by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, "The history of

men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.”(57)

Through Vidya Sharma the movie breaks the stereotypes of a married woman. As Margaret Waters rightly points out in her book named *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, “for a married woman, her home becomes a prison-house. The house itself, as well as everything in it, belongs to the husband, and of all fixtures the most abject is his breeding machine, the wife. Married women are in fact slaves, their situation no better than that of Negroes in the West Indies.”(44)

The egoistic assumption made by Abhimanyu Singh out of his male chauvinistic psyche, “whether Indian women’s hockey team win or lose she (Preity Sabarwal) would only be mine” is proved wrong as after India becomes champions in the World Cup, Preity Sabarwal publicly rejects Abhimanyu Singh’s proposal of marriage and in this way gives a nice message as a modern woman who is conscious of her own self and identity.

Further, when Kabir Khan pleads for a match between the Indian Men’s Hockey team and his Indian Women’s Hockey team, nearly all pre-assumes that the women team will lose. However, the women’s team although loses by one goal difference but plays brilliantly and gets applause from the coach & players of the men’s hockey team and books a seat for the World Championship. This gesture by the men’s hockey team is suggestive of Mary Wollstonecraft’s wish in her seminal book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where she pleads, “I appeal to their understandings; and, as a fellow-creature, claim, in the name of my sex, some interest in their hearts. I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a help meet for them!” (288) In fact, it is the motivational speech of the coach Kabir Khan before the game that instils the fire to win in the women players. Kabir says:

Tum log en ladkon ke khilaaf nahi khel rahi ho . . . yeh mat sochna ki tumhara match en solah ladkon se hai! Na! Tumhara match is mulk ke un sab logon se hai jo sochte hain ki

ladkiyan ladkon jitna accha nahi khel sakti, ladkon jitni acchi naukari nahi kar sakti, ladkon jitne acche faisle nahi kar sakti. Tumhara match har us bevakuf ke sath hai, jo bhul gaya hai agar ladkiyan usko paida kar sakti hain, toh kuch bhi kar sakti hain, kuch bhi! (Chak de! India)

(Meaning: You are not playing against these boys . . . don't think like that your match is with these sixteen boys! No! Your match is with all those people of this country who think that girls can't play as good as boys, can't do good jobs like boys, can't make good decisions like boys. Your match is with that every fool, who has forgotten that if girls can give him birth, then they can do anything, anything!) This speech very clearly highlights how gender stereotypes function in the Indian society. The movie breaks the stereotyping by this beautiful speech coming from the mouth of a male. The success of the '*Chak de girls*' is the result of their own hard work along with the motivation of their coach, who believed in them, trained them to perfection, and became their true fellow being to accomplish their dream.

Conclusion: In this post-modern and tech-savvy society it is highly paradoxical how the market forces operates in an open, fast growing economy where the why there are no sponsors to endorse Indian Women's Cricket team or Indian Women's Hockey team, where 'cheer girls' or bar dancers in five stars hotels are allowed to perform (or sponsored) as there the ends favours the male financially because it is the male fraternity that executes them, but on the other hand when it comes to livelihood dependence of women running the lower and middle class bars on their own; are the ones banned legally because there the women are themselves the executers and controls the finance. As writes Urvashi Butalia, "What's more disturbing though is the way in which women's day has turned into an opportunity to market different products." Mary Wollstonecraft justly argued that the society was wasting its energy by representing women as objects, by assigning to them the roles of domesticity and "alluring mistresses", and by "denying them economic independence and encouraging them to be

docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else” (Tomalin 105). Even in this age of globalisation, woman is in chains of stereotypes within a given structural framework, sold as ‘objects’ whereas the man like earlier is free. Thus, mediums of mass-appeal like sporting events, movies, television shows and ad-commercials must observe and propagate the theme of gender sensitization.

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