

NARRATIVE OF DEFIANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE AND GENDERED LANGUAGE IN THE FILM *SHAKUNTALA DEVI*

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Abstract

Androcentrism and male-centric worldviews still prevail across societies in one form or another. It has been constructed and naturalised into the psyche of people, both male and female. It exists in every field of society, including the media. Popular media has a significant effect on the mindset of society. Today, even though women are increasingly engaged in outdoor remunerative work, they still have the household chores as their prime or in most cases, their sole responsibility. Even though women have so many professional achievements to their credit, they are deemed not equal to their male counterparts, both in matters of pay as well as in decision-making. Though the presence of women in higher educational spaces is increasingly growing, a majority of them are falling back to their homeware tasks after marriage and their participation in the workforce not only remains low, but also shows a trend of decline. With rising education and higher communication skills among women, awareness of gender equality is still an increasing concern, with many bumpy roads ahead, as the patriarchy still rules the roost in our most orthodox societies. This paper engages in analysing the portrayal of working women in a popular Hindi film, *Shakuntala Devi* on Amazon Prime. The paper attempts to decode the indomitable will of the woman protagonist in the film, who bears the challenges of her times and weaves a narrative of success through her uncompromising grit and endurance. The paper critically examines the discourse in the film in the light of feminist stylistic perspectives.

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Introduction

The gender roles and responsibilities in modern society have undergone substantial changes. Women have achieved significant advancements in diverse professional fields, defying conventional standards and establishing their presence in the labour market. Nevertheless, even while women are increasingly participating in paid jobs outdoors, a considerable number still struggle with the responsibility of domestic chores, which are typically assigned to them as their primary or exclusive duty. This occurrence highlights the enduring gender inequalities in the allocation of work, where women are faced with the challenge of balancing their career ambitions with their household responsibilities.

The contrast between women's professional accomplishments and the general view of their talents continues to be a significant issue. Despite achieving notable accomplishments in their professional lives, women often face institutional obstacles and prejudices that hinder their advancement towards achieving genuine parity with their male peers. The persistent belief that women have an intrinsic propensity towards household chores creates a situation where their contributions in professional domains are underestimated or neglected.

Women in their day-to-day lives face various forms of discrimination originating from the patriarchal mindset prevalent in society. Some of the common problems faced by women are the gender pay gap (wage gap), sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, lack of equal opportunities, barriers in career progression, work-life balance, etc. Gender biases are common in workplaces. Women are considered as caregivers and physically and mentally weak as compared to their male counterparts.

This study employs a feminist critical discourse analysis to investigate how women's careers and obstacles are depicted in the biographical film *Shakuntala Devi*. The film, although it portrays specific events from the life of an exceptional lady mathematician, Shakuntala Devi, does not strictly conform to the standards of biographical films. Instead, it provides narratives that intersect with wider societal discourses about gender roles and the advancement of women.

The primary aim of this research is to thoroughly examine how this sort of film portrayal contributes to the formation and

strengthening of gender norms, specifically in relation to women's duties in professional fields compared to their obligations at home. This study aims to analyse the portrayal of Shakuntala Devi's professional paths, focusing on her achievements in her discipline and the obstacles she faced in male-dominated surroundings.

The study will explore how this film portrays woman's career aspirations and societal norms, focusing on their portrayal of female agency and empowerment, and whether this complex portrayal challenges or unintentionally supports patriarchal norms. The research methodology entails a meticulous analysis of the literary components of the film, involving dialogues, sentences, and narrative structure. Utilizing feminist stylistics, the study will examine linguistic indicators to reveal the hidden power dynamics and ideological statements present in the film.

Biopic of Shakuntala Devi

Shakuntala Devi (Menon, 2020) directed by Anu Menon and produced by Sony Pictures, is a feminist film that focuses on the life of Mathematician Shakuntala Devi (role played by Vidya Balan) released on 31st July, 2020 on Amazon Prime during Covid. The film incorporates insights from Shakuntala Devi's daughter, Anupama Banerji, and her husband, Ajay Abhay Kumar. The film has a feminist perspective, with female protagonists taking centre stage. Women play a significant role, while male partners have supporting roles, except for Shakuntala's father, who represents male dominance in the family.

Breaking Gender Stereotypes

Excerpt 1

Shakuntala, when her sister Sharda dies without treatment in the hospital, asks her mother, "*Amma main aapsebaatkarrahi hun; Gungi hokya? Appa kesamne aapka munhkyonnahinkhulta?*"

(Mother, I am talking to you; Are you dumb? Why doesn't your mouth open before father?) (Menon, 2020, 11:20).

Excerpt 2

Shakuntala: *woh mere appanahin; main unkiappa hun, Dusronkegharonmeinappakaunhota hai? Jo kaamkartahai, paise kamatahai, gharchalatahai. Tohhamareghar ka appakaun?*"

(He is not my father; I am his father. In other households, who is the father? The one who works, earns money and runs the household. Then who is the father of our household?) (Menon, 2020, 09:27).

In the above dialogues Shakuntala's rebellious nature is depicted. Shakuntala's father is a domineering patriarch, before whom her mother is submissive and lacks her voice. In our society women hardly speak against their husband no matter what happens. Lakoff and Spender (Mills, 1995a) describe women's communication as exhibiting greater hesitancy, less fluency, less logicity, and less assertiveness compared to men's speech. They note that women "are more silent, interrupt less frequently than men, use tag-questions and modal verbs more than men" (Mills, 1995a). As a child, Shakuntala is unable to understand these power dynamics. She keeps questioning her mother's silence. Cameron also notes that "In a male-dominated society, women are brought up to think of assertion, authority and forcefulness as masculine qualities which they should avoid" (Cameron, 2006, pg. 47). Her father uses her exceptional math skills to earn money doing math shows to generate income. Shakuntala, in her adolescence, shows her anger at her parents for neglecting to seek medical care for her sister, resulting in her demise. Sharda's father adheres to a patriarchal ideology that devalues her and believes that using money to save her life would result in scarcity for others.

The 'India Discrimination Report 2022' by Oxfam India reveals that women in India face discrimination in the job market, even when they possess the same educational qualifications and work experience as men. This discrimination is a result of social and employers' biases. The Oxfam analysis also reveals that discrimination is a significant cause of the country's low Women's Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) (VP, 2022). This discrimination is a result of the perception that women should stay at home to take care of children and elderly members of the family.

Excerpt 3

Sharda: *Shakkutuhjekisi se darnahilagtana... Dekhna ek dintu bahut badaaadmibanegi.*

Shaku, you aren't afraid of anyone, right. Mark my words. You'll be a big man someday.

Shakuntala: *Aadmi kyu banugi?*

Why would I be a man?

Sharda: *Badi aurat banungithode hi kuchhotahai.*

Because there's no such thing as become a big woman!

Shakuntala: *Phirtohi main badiaurat hi banugi.*

In that case I'll definitely be a big woman. (Menon, 2020, 09:58)

Sharda observes that Shakuntala is not afraid of anyone and says that she will become '*ek badaaadam*' (a prominent man) in the future. Shakuntala asks her why not '*ek badiaurat*' (a prominent woman) and Sharda tells her that the concept of *ek badiaurat* does not exist, which highlights the influence of patriarchal norms on society. Shakuntala asserts that then she'll become *ek badiaurat* only, and will always support Sharda, advocating women's rights. This also refers to the breaking of a type of overt sexism where generic nouns and pronouns are used to refer to both male and female. Sara Mills (2008) in her book notes that "male term is seen as the norm or the general term and the female the marked". Young Shakuntala doesn't understand this but wants to challenge this disparity by becoming a "*badi aurat*". In numerous languages, the male term is frequently considered the default term, whereas the feminine term is marked. For instance, the term "actor" is commonly employed as a general term, but "actress" is expressly reserved for women. This labelling indicates that the male phrase is considered the norm or normal, whereas the feminine term is seen as a deviation from this norm. This language phenomenon reflects the prevailing societal conventions that regard men as the default representatives of different roles, while women are frequently viewed as exceptions when they assume those same roles. This leads to an inequality in the perception and assessment of men and women in several aspects of life, such as their professional and personal realms. Shakuntala's dedication to excelling in mathematics, a field historically dominated by males, directly challenges the societal standards that assume men are naturally more intellectually capable. Through her exceptional performance in a field predominantly occupied by men, she challenges and undermines the prevailing belief in male intellectual supremacy.

Dismantling Gender Barriers in Career Progression

Excerpt 4

Tarabai: "*Ek ladaki jo apanemann ki suntihai aur dilkholkarhastihai, mardonkeliyeusse zyadadaravana aur kyahosaktahai?*"

A girl who follows her mind and laughs heartily, what could be scarier to men? (Menon, 2020, 19:15)

Slaughter (2015) in her book *Unfinished Business* observes, “Girls and young women are still immigrants on the shores of a world led and dominated by men. They have a world to conquer, judging by the ways they are outpacing boys in elementary school, high school, and college, they are out to succeed.”

Shakuntala Devi, challenging male superiority, travels alone to London in search of livelihood to do a mathematical show which surprises the male guests in Tarabai’s house. Travelling alone without male company is still considered taboo in many areas in India, whereas many women see this as a significant achievement and independence in their lives.

Excerpt 5

TV show host: “This isn’t the Great Indian Rope Trick, Ms. Devi. Though you do look like you’re at the end of the rope.”

Shakuntala: No, the computer has made a mistake. Actually three mistakes...

TV show host: You know, I was quite excited that a lady mathematician from the land of snake charmers and elephants could somehow beat the computer. But not everyone can be Einstein, can they?” (Menon, 2020)

In the above excerpt, the TV show host couldn’t believe that a lady could do maths and beat the computer. He seems to be further biased with a colonial mindset that the East, the land of “snake charmers and elephants” is inferior to the West. Angela Saini observes, “Since its very earliest days, science has treated women as the intellectual inferiors of men” (Saini, 2017). When it comes to biases against women in scientific fields, there are multiple dimensions to it. They are not only underrepresented but also face discrimination at the workplace and are denied recognition. Women are hardly taken seriously as they are considered only good for caregiving jobs and family responsibilities are considered as hurdles to their professional commitment. Namrata Gupta and Arun Sharma observe in their article that “there are three major problems faced by the women academic scientists due to gender: (a) general male dominance in the work environment; (b) feeling of isolation; and (c) experience of conflict between being a woman and a scientist” (Gupta & Sharma, 2002). It is often believed that men are suited for mathematics and other hard-core sciences whereas women are more oriented towards

humanities. Therefore, women are discouraged from pursuing scientific fields and careers. Even those who are able to pursue scientific careers are expected to focus more towards their family responsibilities. Therefore they are denied leadership roles at the workplaces.

Balancing Marriage, Child Care, and Career Paths

Excerpt 6

Deeraj Murthy: *Aksar hamareyahan ki auratengharchalayakartihain* (Generally, women in our community run the household)... "*Meri jaan! Hindustan meinshaadi eksaudahotihai, jo maa baaptaykarte hain. Meri jaan! Hamare beech kuch nahinbadalnewala. Shakuntala! Mere pitaji ne hamare jaatmein khud hi merarishtataykar diya; bade izzatdar aur paise wale log hain. Tum bahut aatmnirbharho, merakhandankafisadharanhai aur tum kisibhilihaj se sadharan nahinho.*"

(My love! In Hindustan, marriage is a deal which the parents fix. My love! Nothing is going to change between us. Shakuntala! My father on his own arranged my marriage from his own caste; they are very respected and rich people. You are too independent and my family is a very ordinary one and you are in no way ordinary). Shakuntala asks him to stop calling her *meri jaan* (my love), and declaring that this is what an ordinary girl would have done, she in her anger and protest, aims a double barrelled gun at him... (Menon, 2020, 14:00).

Shakuntala falls in love with Deeraj Murthy during her math shows. She asks him if he has discussed their plans to marry with his parents. He replies that he's going on a hunting expedition for pheasant-quail and will talk to them after his return. However, she then discovers his wedding card accidentally. In the above dialogue his patriarchal thinking is exposed. To him, Shakuntala is not an ordinary woman whom he can control but he wants to keep his relationship with her even after his marriage.

Gender biases are very common at workplaces. Women are considered as caregivers and physically and mentally weak as compared to the male counterparts. When it comes to working mothers, the problem is more challenging. Roopali Sharmanotes, "In the hustle of striking a balance between family and work, working mothers need to make a choice every time" (R. Sharma & Dhir, 2022). Similarly, Behera and Padhi observe that adjusting between these two realms becomes difficult for these working mothers, as almost no one is willing to share their responsibilities at work or

home (Behera & Padhi, 1993). Despite this, many women started working because of numerous reasons. However, when it comes to working women, it is perceived that while a working woman may have a higher socio-economic status compared to a housewife, it is also true that she is overwhelmed with multiple responsibilities both at home and in the office (Behera & Padhi, 1993).

Excerpt 7

Shakuntala Devi to Paritosh: *Main sirf maa nahihoon, main ab bhi main hoon... jab main Anu ko rhymes sunati hun tab bhi mere mannmein numbers chakrahehotelain...wohapna rattle sunketalibajatihaitohmujhe meri audience ki taliyaansunaideti hain. Verandah dekhti hun tohapna stage yaadatahai...*

"I'm not just a mother. I'm still me....When I recite rhymes to Anu, my mind buzzes with numbers. When she hears the rattle and claps, I miss the applause of my audience. When I look at the *verandah*, it reminds me of my stage." (Menon, 2020, 54:15).

Many a time, leadership roles are denied to women as a result of gender discrimination. Marriage and motherhood are often seen as obstacles in their job commitment. Sharma and Dhir observe that "After maternity, a key barrier to a woman's career advancement is the lack of family support" (R. Sharma & Dhir, 2022). Despite having good education and credentials their career faces lots of setbacks. Slaughter (2015) observes, "It is this devaluing of and discrimination against caregiving that provides the common thread linking the experiences of women at the top and at the bottom. If a young female lawyer or banker on a promising career track decides to leave early every day to be at home with her kids for dinner, work part-time, or take time out for a while to be a full-time caregiver, she is quickly knocked out of the game – meaning the competition for the top. And if she takes time out completely, her time spent caregiving is a black mark on her resume going forward, a hole that she will vainly try to cover over or explain away when and if she tries to re-enter the job market."

In the film, Paritosh allows her to resume her career as a world-famous mathematician doing math shows around the world while he looks after the baby which shows him to be a cooperating husband. However, Shakuntala later suffers from a guilt complex that when her daughter speaks for the first time she asks for her father and not her mother. It complicates her situation as a mother.

Women's participation in the workforce not only gives them confidence but also empowers them socially and economically.

Hochschild & Machung (2012) in their book, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*, note that “working mothers have higher self-esteem and get less depressed than housewives, but compared to their husbands, they’re more tired and get sick more often”.

Excerpt 8

Shakuntala Devi: *“Jab ek bete ki maa yeh expect kartihai ki uski bahu uskesathuskegharmeinrahe to vah normal hai, per vahin jab ek beti ki maa yeh expect kartihai ki uska damad aur uskibeti uskesathrahetohuse jail karrahihai. What logic is that?”*

(When a boy’s mother expects her daughter-in-law to stay with her it is normal but when a girl’s mother expects her daughter and son-in-law to stay with her, she is jailing her.) “What logic is that?” (Menon, 2020, 1:30:40).

Shakuntala Devi is a staunch gynocentric woman and desires her daughter and son-in-law to live with her in London, while Ajay believes it’s normal for Anu to stay with him in Bangalore after marriage. Shakuntala Devi questions the logic behind this. She insists that Anu will never leave her. Ajay tells Shakuntala Devi that she should ask Anu what she wants and reveals that he loves her more than anything. The incident demonstrates the societal expectation for women to leave their homes and relocate to their husband’s residences after marriage, while the opposite is considered unacceptable. This assumption is a reflection of conventional gender norms and the patriarchal hierarchy prevalent in several civilizations. As a cultural practice, women used to relocate to their husband’s houses and used to bring dowry along with them which granted a higher status to males in the society. Therefore, a woman’s sense of individuality and societal standing were frequently linked to the lineage of her spouse. Becoming a part of her husband’s home could elevate her social status and ensure her position in society. Shakuntala questions this cultural practice. Shakuntala Devi’s life and choices in the film provide a critical examination of patriarchal conventions that prescribe a woman’s role within her husband’s household. Her achievements and ability to rely on herself serve as evidence of the possibility for a life that goes beyond these conventional limitations. The film highlights the empowerment and autonomy of women in determining their own life decisions. The narrative of Shakuntala Devi serves as a source of inspiration and provocation for the audience, urging them to reconsider the conventional gender

norms imposed on women and to acknowledge the significance of empowering women's ambitions.

Discussion

The film *Shakuntala Devi* portrays a strong female protagonist who challenges traditional gender norms and does not conform to societal expectations. Shakuntala refuses to be confined by the expectations placed on her as a woman. The film explores Shakuntala's journey towards self-realization, her struggles in balancing personal and professional responsibilities, and her determination to challenge norms and conventions. The film presents a nuanced portrayal of the protagonist, highlighting her flaws. Her characterization does not idealize her, rather presents her as a complex individual. Shakuntala's dialogues exhibit her wit and intelligence. She uses language as a tool to assert her existence, identity and authority. She dreams of becoming a "*badiaurat*" (a prominent woman). A careful analysis of the film reveals how gender stereotypes and inequalities exist in society. Mills notes that language prioritises male experiences and opinions while marginalising or censoring female ones, perpetuating power disparities (Mills, 2008). While elaborating on feminist stylistics at the level of discourse Mills observes that in workplaces, both females and males are frequently portrayed in roles that conform to stereotypes (Mills, 1995). However, in the film, Shakuntala does not conform to these stereotypes. Shakuntala is portrayed as an author and an astrologer, as someone doing Math shows. These domains are considered as male-dominated.

In the film, Shakuntala Devi had to fight against the traditional stereotypes attached to women which require women to confine themselves in the domestic space and become caregivers. Shakuntala Devi had to demonstrate her mental capabilities to society; she is a gynocentric, radical feminist from her childhood and defies patriarchy and Androcentrism. She is projected as a flamboyant, self-reliant and assertive woman. Her dialogues are witty, sharp and thought-provoking. The manifestation of her resistance to patriarchal conventions is apparent in her interactions with male characters. She is portrayed as a successful person who gives priority to her career. Often, such women are projected in a negative light. However, the film recognises her accomplishments and perseverance in defying societal conventions. The film delves into the topics of parenthood, selflessness, and the societal pressures on women who must balance their professional and personal lives. It offers a vibrant portrayal of

a woman's life by highlighting both her professional achievements and personal hurdles thereby avoiding simplistic generalisations. As evident in the dialogues cited above, she had to confront ingrained sexism in society both at home and at work. Shakuntala Devi firmly believes in equality and asserts that there is no basis for considering men as superior to women: "*Vidya kasam! Mujhena ye mard aur aurat ka antarkabhi samajh main nahinaaya!*" (I swear! I've never understood this disparity between men and women!) (Menon, 2020, 19:25).

Conclusion

In today's modern world, women continue to bravely challenge and confront the deep-rooted sexism that still persists in our society. *Shakuntala Devi* specifically examines the intricacies of childcare and familial connections in greater detail and provides a comprehensive analysis of societal norms imposed on women, particularly in terms of intelligence and self-reliance. In conclusion, OTT platforms are portraying women in multifaceted roles with complex characterizations exposing the inherent bias and sexism towards women in terms of language. These films urge the audience to change their attitude towards women.

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