



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.1. 2022 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
EN/14A
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

COMMODITY FEMINISM: A STUDY OF FEMINISM AS MARKETING TOOL IN INDIAN
MOVIES OF 21st CENTURY

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Article information

Received:18/02/2022

Accepted: 10/03/2022

Published online:13/03/2022

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.1.106](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.1.106)

ABSTRACT

Women, their bodies and sexuality have always the tools of gaining money and sales in the entertainment industry. However, the lens to project women's bodies and sexuality has changed with times. Earlier, products and movies were sold by commodification of women's bodies by using female body as a tool to grab attention and to promote sales. However, with times, there has been a massive emphasis on women's equality and emancipation, which has led to criticism of the idea of abusive use and sexual objectification of female body in movies and commercials. This, in turn, has led to beginning of another era of commodity feminism or femvertising. The present research paper aims to study select 21st century Indian movies produced with the feminist agendas and characters at their centre, in order to study the motives and effectiveness of using feminism as a marketing tool.

It is the era of marketing, advertising and capitalism, when everything can be sold using the right strategies at the right time. Feminism is the buzz word now-a-days and it is in fashion to be called a feminist, whether or not you genuinely practice women's equality in real terms. As feminism is a much talked about discourse in present times, Advertising and entertainment industry have attempted to channel key aspects of feminist discourse into semiotic markers for monetary gains. In the era of capitalism and commercialization, even massive political movement like feminism, having serious issues at its core, has been adopted by entertainment industry to promote its gains and products, in form of advertisements and movies that sell under the name of women's equality and liberty.

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From Hollywood to Bollywood, 'feminism' seems to be the 'it word' these days. Feminism began as a movement aimed at equality and liberation for women in Europe in 1920s, then growing into the famous three waves of feminism. The movement that was aimed at the significant task of emancipation of women, has now been modified to serve various patriarchal capitalist interests of the film industry. Everything is saleable under the regime of today's capitalistic market. Unfortunately, the cause of feminism too is selling like hot cakes in the entertainment industry.

What we see today in the film industry is a blatant misuse and abuse of the term feminism. The aim of this research work is not to question the feminist beliefs highlighted by our movies but the whole intention and motive of displaying and asserting their beliefs and concerns right before a movie's release or for commercial gain by feeding us wonderful quotes and anecdotes about women empowerment.

The selective approach of film fraternity towards women's issues makes it seem like the cause of feminism is nothing but a marketing tool for the film industry. After the promotions, the same film stars groove on sexist songs and effortlessly mouthing sexist dialogues. In an industry where sexual harassment is rampant, disparity of payment a burning issue; feminism as a matter of practical applicability is losing seems too good to be true. In *The Problem with Femvertising*, Katie Martell (2017) also deals with the issue that in the world of marketing, there continues to be a disturbing trend related to feminism "that is moving us in the wrong direction" (114). Entertainment industry is trying to capitalize on something that had a concrete motive of women's emancipation and is, in effect, ruining it.

There is no doubt about the fact that more and more movies raising consciousness around women and other sexual minorities need to be made. But what we as a movement must be weary of, is this very commodification of feminism. The struggles of our ancestors must not be reduced to that of a PR activity, bill board hoarding for advertisements, movies, clothes, bags and other forms of commodities for mere consumption.

What is rather needed is to focus on raising awareness and consciousness about the movement, engaging as many people, fighting for equality as we challenge the system. It is crucial that feminism reaches the masses, and not just remain mainstream. Jessa Crispin in her book, "Why I Am Not A Feminist" offers a critique of mainstream feminism. She rightly says, "calling yourself a unicorn doesn't mean you are unicorn. The same goes for feminism" (4). Women's emancipation is a serious issue and needs to be treated sensitively.

Since the present research project studies feminism as a marketing tool in Indian Movies, it needs mention here that feminism has gained popularity in India in 21st century. With the spread of feminism as a thought and movement, feminists in India have been critiquing and targeting the Hindi movies in which women/female leads are presented as victims, are involved in hypersexual dance numbers, are portrayed as sex objects such as in the movies of the 80s, 90s and 2000s.

The 'heroic' and central characters have always been played by the male leads till twentieth century and the female leads merely fill the gaps and entertain people with their beauty and hypersexual dance numbers. The Hindi cinema industry claims that there are movies in which women play the central role, for example, *Mother India* or *Sita aur Gita*, where the main protagonists are women.

However, if you look through the 'feminist' lens, you will find that the female lead in *Mother India*, Nargis, portrays the role of a mother within the 'traditional cultural' norms, who would do anything to protect her family. Sociologists Emile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu have stressed that the 'traditional cultural' norms are the opposite to the values of the 'modern industrial society', where along with economic empowerment women, too, have the right to enjoy the sun out in their bikinis. Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss has termed such societies as "cold societies" (256). In the Indian context, back in 90s, women represented the honour of the family. While women characters had no real power whatsoever, they were expected to sacrifice themselves to save their family. In *Mother India*, a woman, despite hardships, raises her three children. She is bound to follow the same household rituals that her mother and grandmother followed. She had to live the life that patriarchal society had decided for women long ago. The concept of the 'ideal mother' or 'mother India', as depicted in the

movie, seems very narrow in retrospect. Such women characters are a strong contrast to women characters in 21st century movies.

In recent years, female centric movies, where women not only play the central part, but are presented as strong individuals, standing up for their rights and asserting their identity have been made and are trending. The 2012 movie featuring Sridevi, *English Vinglish*, was highly acclaimed by the audience. The story is woven around women who have never been to schools and who give up everything to educate their children for a better future. This is the reality in many Indian homes. However, when the children learn to speak English, they feel ashamed of their mother because of her inability to speak fluent English. In the film, Sridevi is mocked by her husband for her inability to speak English. Despite coming from an educated middle-class family, she decides to take up an English language class to show her potential and to reclaim her respect in her family. Although the movie tries to impart that we mustn't underestimate anyone's ability, the idea that the skill of speaking and comprehending English can make one feel proud and derive respect in her family betrays our colonial hangover.

The 2014 movie, *Queen*, created quite a buzz in B-Town. Many feminists proclaimed it as a 'coming-of-age' movie. The movie narrates the story of a young conservative woman, whose fiancé calls off their wedding because his love towards her changed over time. Heartbroken, she decides to go alone for their pre-booked honeymoon trip to Paris and Amsterdam. Kangana Ranaut's portrayal in the movie normalises the idea of a girl doing things such as solo travelling, gambling and dancing in the public that are still looked down upon. Further, many claim that the movie has managed to foreground that there's nothing wrong in being boisterous, fun-loving, and outgoing. Kangana's role in the movie was a shocking but highly sold idea of a woman taking control of her life and not letting marriage be her only destiny.

From there, an era of Indian feminist movies like *Padman*, *Pink*, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, *Ik Ladki ko Dekha* has begun. It must be noted that all of them are hundred crores blockbuster, signifying the fact that feminism as an idea sells. The advertising industry, once bent on selling us sex is now selling us its products and ideas under the garb of feminism. We are living now in an era where hashtag feminism is considered the more palatable face of femvertising that is feminism as a tool for advertising, songs or movies.

As feminism as a social and cultural movement gained momentum in twenty first century, the entertainment industry needed to change their marketing strategies as per the demands of the times and audience. Thus, entertainment industry came up with the idea of using feminism, a tag in trend, as a marketing tool.

Not only film industry but advertisement industry too is enmeshed in femvertising. For instance, just have a look at the advertising of Dove. The brand has been racking up headlines, ad awards and cash-register receipts ever since launching "Campaign for Real Beauty". Dove sales have jumped to \$2 billion from \$5.1 billion from 2016 to 2021, as published by Statista Research Branch, on their website. Furthermore, the creatives behind Dove's lauded campaign, Janet Kestin and Nancy Vonk, are also about to publish a book "Darling You Can't Do Both: And Other Noise to Ignore on Your Way Up."

To quote another example, Facebook's COO Sheryl Sandberg's book "Lean In," which explores women's progress in leadership roles, just recorded its 71st week on the New York Times Best Sellers list. Her organization LeanIn.org is tackling institutional sexism by partnering with stock-photo giant Getty on an image collection that abolishes female stereotypes.

#HeForShe, fronted by Emma Watson, has taken big themes – the research from, say, McKinsey Global Institute that "there is \$28tn missing from the global economy because we don't have gender equality" – and refashioned them into a solidarity movement lived out through social media (48).

In all, it means we will see more drives to sell young women empowerment through individual brands or projects. It is fashionable to talk about feminism and women's empowerment these days. Everybody seems to have an opinion on how a woman's life could and should be lived. Social media, classroom debates and political agendas are the latest battlegrounds of the sexes. Men have been framed in a particular paradigm of masculinity – which is another debate and there are also a range of feminists believe that portraying themselves

like the male partners or participating in activities like males could give them an equal position in the society, as portrayed in Pep Scooty's advertisement with the tag line 'why should boys have all the fun'.

The research paper does not aim to denounce or snub movies that have a feminist angle to it or that showcase strong female leads. The motive is to study commodity feminism as a marketing strategy has usually been studied with reference to brand advertisements. It is easier to detect that under the garb of feminism, a product is being sold by the company for monetary gains but because movies are not selling concrete products but ideas, the hidden consumerist agenda behind the feminist motto is not explicit.

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