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Female Infidelity in Mass Media: Reflection of Patriarchal Mindset or Harbinger of Societal Change?

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ABSTRACT

The topic of female infidelity evokes strong sentiments in Indian society - marred with stigma eliciting severe critical judgment it is considered a crime and a threat to the deeply entrenched existing patriarchal social structure. Women in India for long have been treated as a property of not only the man but of the entire community and her disloyalty is perceived as a betrayal of not only the husband but the entire family and clan. In this backdrop, the portrayal of this extremely sensitive topic in Indian mass media i.e. cinema, television, and OTT is simultaneously a reflection of the prevalent patriarchal norms of society while having the potential to become a tool for influencing and morphing societal attitudes.

This article would begin by defining female infidelity through legal frameworks, socio-cultural and religious beliefs highlighting the feminist perspective about it. It would then proceed to analyze the depiction of female infidelity in mass media dwelling on the reasons depicted which lead women towards other partners. The article would proceed to critique the mass media's approach to the depiction of the culmination of such relationships from a feminist perspective. The article would also attempt to juxtapose the treatment of male infidelity in mass media, with the man often depicted as virile and macho as he is 'handling' two women simultaneously,

This article is an attempt to examine the relationship between the desired legal and social reforms and the potential to harness the influence of mass media in shaping public opinion contributing to a more progressive conversation about women's rights and autonomy. The article concludes with recommendations for filmmakers to adopt storytelling norms which embraces female autonomy so that mass media can promote societal change and contribute to a more just and equal society.

Keywords: *Female Infidelity, Patriarchal Norms, Mass Media, Autonomy and Agency Societal Change.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Infidelity is defined as the *act or fact of having a romantic or sexual relationship with someone*

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other than one's husband, wife, or partner².

(A) What Does the Law Say?

The legal landscape regarding adultery in India has undergone considerable transformation reflecting evolving societal attitudes and the advancement of gender equality. Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code considered adultery as a criminal offence till 2018, imposing penalties exclusively on men involved with married women, while women were exempt from legal actions³. This unjust legal framework reinforced patriarchal notions, considering women as property and giving the aggrieved husband the right to complaint while no such relief was available to an aggrieved wife which in a way led to the conclusion that a married man was in no way wronging his wife when he indulged in an extra marital affair. The patriarchal nature of the law was further strengthened by the fact that no offence occurred when a man was involved with an unmarried woman.

The Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018) signified a crucial change by decriminalizing adultery⁴. The court found the law unconstitutional, arguing that it violated individual liberty, privacy and equality, particularly for women. This ruling restructured the legal framework surrounding personal autonomy in marital contexts and recognized the equal legal status of women. While adultery is no longer treated as a criminal offence, it still serves as a valid basis for divorce in the context of personal laws indicating a continued societal discomfort with infidelity.

II. RELIGIOUS VIEWPOINT ON INFIDELITY

The interpretation of female infidelity is interesting and varied in mythological narratives- while *Radha* and *Meera* who sought love beyond the constraints of societal expectations are celebrated and even venerated, *Ahalya* and *Sita* are cursed, though there was no consent of the women in their abuse in both the cases, reinforcing the patriarchal ideal of purity of women.

(A) How Does Society See Female Infidelity?

In India marriage is considered sacrosanct and umpteen couples continue in a practically dead marriage where there is no love or even downright abuse - whether physical, emotional, sexual or financial, simply due to societal pressure. This social and family pressure against dissolving a marriage often leads unhappy women to seek love outside marriage though modern society

² Hrishav Dasgupta, Vidhi Centre For Legal policy (Nov.8 2024), <https://vidhilegalpolicy.in/blog/adultery-and-infidelity/>.

³ Dristhi, <https://www.drishtijudiciary.com/editorial/re-criminalizing-adultery>.

⁴ Rachit Garg, *Joseph Shine vs Union of India* : Case Analysis (Jan.1 2024), <https://blog.ipleaders.in/case-analysis-joseph-shine-v-union-india/>.

treats female infidelity as immoral warranting the strictest punishment- which is witnessed in various news reports of torture inflicted by panchayats on women who digress.

III. FEMINIST TAKE ON FEMALE INFIDELITY

Magda Elsehrawi, in her text "Gendered Infidelity in Comparative Literary Context," says that female infidelity is a result of a combination of emotional dissatisfaction and the quest for identity⁵. She posits that women may seek extramarital relationships as a means to fulfil unmet emotional needs or to assert their independence in patriarchal contexts.

(A) Indian Mass Media's Depiction of Female Infidelity

A gaze into the historical background of infidelity through the prism of Indian culture, religion, and legal frameworks would surprisingly reveal how extramarital relationships of women have been both demonized and romanticized. The Indian mass media, reflecting the values of society, has faced challenges in its representation of female infidelity. The representation of female infidelity in mass media, when viewed from a feminist standpoint, offers a critical framework for understanding larger societal issues related to women's agency, autonomy and resistance against patriarchal norms. Initial representations of female infidelity in Indian cinema and television predominantly relied on moralistic themes and the resolution typically involved reconciliation, highlighting the primacy of marital sanctity over personal satisfaction.

a. Reasons for Infidelity

The reason depicted in movies for female infidelity range from lack of time and attention given by of husband as in *Charulata*, husband being away due to work like in *Rustom*, age difference like in *Anhadhun*, woman being in a previous relationship before marriage like in *Murder*, forced marriage like in *Kalank*, husband being in another relationship like in *Fire*, lack of love like *Haseen Dilruba* and husband being impotent like in *Mrityudand*.

Infidelity is often utilized as a narrative strategy to investigate the outcomes of emotional neglect, abuse, or dissatisfaction within the institution of marriage. In recent years, a few films and web series have attempted to challenge norms exploring themes of desire, autonomy and women's defiance against oppressive marital systems aiming to humanize women, framing their choices as a response to both personal and societal challenges but such movies have been the target of public backlash depicting the patriarchal mindset of the society.

⁵ Magda Elsehrawi, *Gendered Infidelity in Comparative Literary Context*, . AUC Knowledge Fountain.1(2012).

b. Kinds of Infidelity

Bollywood movies have depicted varied forms of infidelity- emotional infidelity like the film *Lunchbox*, lesbian like in *Fire*, relation with a ghost like in *Paheli*, incestuous like in the web series *Mirzapur* adding nuanced layers to the sensitive issue.

(B) Depiction of Culmination

Indian mass media, whenever it dared to take up the topic of female infidelity in a positive light have failed women as in most portrayals the woman is depicted as returning to the husband honoring the matrimonial bond, often choosing to disregard the abuse she had suffered which propelled her towards the new relationship, sometimes also sacrificing her autonomy and personal happiness in a bid to conform to the deep entrenched social norms.

A socio-cultural examination of this depiction would reveal that Indian media has traditionally upheld patriarchal values and though some brave hearts may dare to depict strong women seeking personal happiness but except in rare cases media representations conform to patriarchal ideals by either punishing women who are perceived as misbehaving or redeeming them by a reconciliation or killing off either or both the errant partners. However, there are few exceptions, like in the movie *Astitva* the woman walks out of the marriage bolstered by the support of her future daughter in law even when the husband and son are unable to digest the truth.

(C) Male Infidelity

The treatment of female infidelity stands out more sorely when compared with the media's representation of male infidelity where such dalliances are treated as humorous like in the film *Gharwali Baharwali* with the man almost being idolized. In such narratives the sentiments of the other woman are trivialized while glorifying the wife who forgives the husband to maintain peace in the family. A notable exception being *Arth* which presents a woman's quest for self-identity after her marriage is shattered by the husband's infidelity challenging conventional societal norms by portraying a woman's choice to forgo reconciliation in favor of establishing an independent existence.

(D) Reception

Movies depicting female infidelity ending with the wife returning to the husband have usually been well received by the audience especially when they glorify the man as being emancipated and forgiving and the rare movies depicting women choosing to listen to their heart haven't- *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* which depicted a woman in a loveless marriage seeking solace was

massively criticized for glorifying extra marital affair with the director recently apologizing for the transgression.

IV. ANALYSIS OF DEPICTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FILMMAKERS

Mass media has considerable power to challenge traditional patriarchal values and alter societal attitudes. By representing female infidelity as a justified reaction to dissatisfaction in marriage or as a form of personal growth, media can help to validate women's autonomy in their relational dynamics. Furthermore, these portrayals can promote discussions about the underlying structural disparities within marriage such as the imbalanced distribution of physical and emotional labor and the stigma that often accompanies divorce.

(A) Reflection of Societal Norms but Change is the Only Constant

Mass media being a commercial venture cannot be faulted for choosing to confirm to the existing social norms but to attain a transformative society it is essential to adopt narratives that emphasize depth, empathy, and progressive perspectives. Filmmakers essentially lack both the creative acumen and financial backing to traverse the path less explored in their quest for success. Stories should focus on exploring women's emotional and psychological journeys revealing the complexities of their choices rather than reducing them to mere stereotypes. Moreover, exploring the narratives that unfold after an affair can provide a realistic view of the consequences, whether through reconciliation, divorce, or the pursuit of an independent life. These narratives can provide viewers with a comprehensive understanding of relationships and individual agency.

(B) Way Ahead

Narratives that empower women by affirming their choices and happiness should replace endings which represent the women compromising thereby challenging the patriarchal societal belief that women must endure suffering when they prioritize their own desires. By adopting this approach, media can promote open discussions, transform societal perceptions and contribute to the establishment of a more equitable community.

V. CONCLUSION

In Indian society, the topic of female infidelity is a contentious one, viewed as unacceptable and deplorable, illustrating the clash between traditional values and contemporary ideals. While mass media has occasionally pushed back against patriarchal narratives, its representations are often limited by societal expectations. Rather than validating female desires and agency, such narratives frequently treat them as abnormal perpetuating the societal expectation that women's

roles are limited to caregiving and self-denial. Examining the topic through a feminist lens indicates that the societal stigma associated with female infidelity is influenced by patriarchal norms that shape women as faithful partners and nurturing mothers. Such societal expectations undermine women's individuality and reinforce the idea that their identities are primarily defined by their relationships with men. To align the portrayal of female infidelity with feminist viewpoint it is crucial to authentically and empathetically represent women's experiences. This commitment allows mass media to play a pivotal role in normalizing women's agency and fostering gender equality. The integration of intersectionality is essential for accurately representing the varied experiences of women within diverse socio-economic, cultural, and geographical frameworks. Furthermore, legal reforms have influenced how media narratives are constructed, leading to more nuanced and empathetic portrayals that are consistent with the principles of autonomy and equality advocated by contemporary legal frameworks.
