

Article

The Brownfaced Bollywood: An Analysis on the Presentation of Dark-Skinned Characters in Bollywood Films (Based on the 2019 Movies, Bala, Gully Boy and Super 30)

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A B S T R A C T

One way to answer why representation is necessary is by substantiating the consequences of the shortfall in representation. Representation matters because they represent people, places, things and events! And these representations can be someone's first impressions. A child who has just been exposed to the world of fairytales might think that being beautiful is to possess golden hair and light skin! Representation matters because it teaches you about communities, identities, indigenous groups, social issues and even the history of events. A medium like cinema that has the potential to reach a massive audience should always be cautious and well-researched when it decides to volume up areas that require attentiveness. A content creator must hold both sensibility and sensitivity during the attempt to understand the subject.

Through this research study, the researcher has decided to investigate the existence of colourism in the Bollywood industry, by analyzing the portrayal behaviours of the dark-skinned characters on the screen. The repetitive patterns used in the depictions, the structuration of characters and examining whether the attributed features of the characters are necessary or are upshots of prejudiced minds.

The study focuses on examining the presentation of dark-skinned characters in the Bollywood industry, based on the movies, Super 30, Bala and Gully Boy, released in the year 2019 and the stereotypes associated with these depictions. All three movies comprise central characters who are dark-skinned. A content analysis based on the media representation theory and semiotics theory by Charles Sanders Pierce has been conducted to understand the patterns and similarities in showcasing dark-skinned characters on the screen. A sample survey consisting of 100 samples has also been carried out to gain perceptions of the general audience concerning the presence of colourism in the industry.

Keywords: Bollywood, Brownfacing, Colourism, Dark Skin, Representation, Stereotype

Introduction

According to BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) Bitesize's revision paper on 'What is Representation?', representation in the media refers to how media texts showcase age, ethnicity, gender, national-regional identity and other social issues to a large audience. They suggest that media texts hold the power to determine the audience's knowledge and understanding of the topics around them. This in turn makes media one of the most powerful weapons in the world to influence people. Therefore a false representation of an identity or an issue can also lead to the propagation of a false idea to the minds of a wide range of people. The general perception can be altered through such miscommunication. Prejudices and biases are thus created and are ingrained in the minds of the people which makes the truth harder to realize.

Undoubtedly media shapes a huge role in our viewing of dark-skinned people in society. One can also notice the scantiness in the number of black life stories present in the media. The difference in the number of black-skinned actors as compared to the light-skinned actors in the Indian film industry itself is another instance to consider. The linkages of caste, socio-economic background, gender to skin colour are accompanied by a bunch of stereotyped notions, about the community. Black participation is notably less in number even when in cases where the stories are centred on them. In films, the act of brown facing results in the less number of opportunities for black actors to take up roles. Less number of opportunities will result in less participation and affects the survival of a person as an actor in the industry.

The movies taken for the analysis include Super 30 which is based on a real-life person's journey, named Anand Kumar, a Mathematics prodigy whose circumstances lead him to become a tutor and start free entrance coaching classes for poor students. The movie has a brown-faced Hrithik Roshan for his role as Anand Kumar who in real life belongs to a lower caste and had a low socio-economic background. Gully Boy, the second movie chosen is a musical drama directed by Zoya Akhtar and has a plot based on two real-life rappers from the slums of Mumbai. A brown-faced Ranveer Singh plays the central character Murad who is a rapper from a minority community with a low socio economic background. The third movie Bala by Amar Kaushik has Ayushmann Khurrana, Bhumi Pednekar and Yami Gautam as the central characters. The movie attempts to state that conventional beauty standards are not parameters to decide on a person's worthiness. It revolves around premature baldness, light skin obsession and the body shaming and discrimination associated with it. The character Latika played by Bhumi Pednekar is brown-faced to 'represent' the societal pressures faced by a dark-skinned woman in the society.

The researcher believes that the topic of the study is relevant in the present context with movements like Black Lives Matter and the existence of discriminatory treatment against the community across the world. The representation of dark bodies on the screen is an area to revise and revamp in the Bollywood industry. The analysis of the major roles in the three films might help to get a deeper understanding and realization of how a creator's biased notions and assumptions will result in the misrepresentation of characters on the screen. It might also bring clarity on the duties and responsibilities of a content creator and the code of conduct to be maintained in the film industry.

Objectives

The general objective of the study is to examine the presentation of dark-skinned characters in the 2019 bollywood films, Super 30, Gully Boy and Bala and discern the stereotypes associated with the representation.

- One of the specific objectives is to study the portrayal of village people as dark-skinned characters
- The Second objective is to analyse the portrayal of lower castes as dark-skinned
- And the third objective of the research study is to inspect the depiction of people with low socio-economic background as dark-skinned

Review of Literature

A Deeper Understanding on Colourism and Representation

'Postcolonial Hangover: Obsession of Fair Skin in Bollywood Songs' 2021 by Manisha Mishra talks about the influence of Bollywood in propagating colourism to the Indian audience. It centres on the relation between colourism and gender and states that most of the colourist songs are based on women as compared to men. According to the paper, Bollywood is still suffering from colonial prejudices about colourism. The treatment of the lower caste community as uneducated, dark-skinned, foolish people in films is an observation put forward in the paper, 'Colourism, Casteism, Gentrification in Bollywood' 2022 by Rebecca Peters. The paper also mentions that in cases where a dark-skinned actor is being hired, they would be always the villain or associated with evilness in one or another way. This point is validated by taking the movie Chennai Express (2013) into consideration. The central characters of the movie played by actors Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone are light-skinned but all the villains, mobsters and buffoons are depicted as dark-skinned. Another observation proposed in the paper is how a director decides on which character to be dark. In most cases, the characters decided to belong to a lower caste, lower class, indigenous groups, or are Muslims. Gully Boy, Super 30, Uda Punjab are taken into account

here. The shortcoming in addressing the cultural identity of characters is accurately addressed in the paper. How the films like *Mary Kom* (2014) and *3 Idiots* (2009) failed to mention the cultural identity of the central characters are quoted as examples.

'The Never Ending Saga of Colourism in India' 2021 by Tanushi Bhatnagar affirms that Brown facing is more than the creative liberty for expression, rather it is an offensive act. The article points out that the process of hiring light-skinned actors for roles that are indeed intended for dark skin actors will reduce the opportunities for appropriate people. Many black characters tend to be one-dimensional, suggests Kai Nelson in the paper 'Where's the Representation? The Impact of Whitewashing on Black Children' 2016. On the other hand, white characters are glorified as heroes, saviours, shy, brave, weak, etc. The paper tells that the general perception values white as a default race. It talks about how commonly black bodies are represented as unattractive, loud, abusive, sexualized and opinionated. The word black erasure is implied in the study as the process of removing black bodies and voices from the media.

The study 'Tinction of Brown Bodies: An Exploration of Gendered Colourism and Representation of Dark Skinned Women in Malayalam Movies' 2021 by Uthara Geetha was able to identify the stereotype considering caste as a reason for the racial and biological differences. Conforming to the author's words, the representation in these films has a brahminical gaze that explains ideals of beauty and virtue in terms of caste norms.

'Stagnant Prejudice against Dark Skin in South Indian Cinema' 2021 by Shriya Penmetsa posits an interesting observation on the pattern of pairing a dark-skinned male lead with a light-skinned female lead but never a dark-skinned female lead with a light-skinned male lead. The paper also talks about how colonialism and the invasion of other rulers resulted in generating the perception of white being supreme. The preference for light-skinned actors disregarding their acting ability, language proficiency and other casting criteria is a repetitive behaviour in the industry. The author suggests that the problem continues because the Indian audience fails to address the colourism seen in the movies as they believe light skin is an ideal beauty standard.

Methodology

In the study, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are used for the collection of data and for gaining a piece of in-depth knowledge about the subject of the study. For the qualitative method, content analysis is being conducted based on the three Hindi language films, *Super 30*, *Gully Boy* and *Bala*. These are 2019 released Bollywood films that have central characters as dark-skinned. The presentation of

these central characters in the films will be examined based on the application of Charles Sanders Pierce's semiotics and media representation theory.

As part of the quantitative method, a sample survey through random sampling method has been performed with 100 participants involved to gain the perceptions of the public on the existence of colourism in the Indian film industry. A short questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was prepared and circulated on Google forms to receive their feedback. The population chosen was aged from 18 to 25. The participants were based in West Bengal, Bangalore, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Variables in the Study

Independent Variables

Sign, interpretant, object are the independent variables of the study.

Dependent Variables

Brown facing, socio economic background, caste, class, ethnicity, geography, other distinct features concerning the central characters.

Theoretical Framework

Media representation theory and the semiotic theory by Charles Sanders Pierce are opted as the foundational theories for the research paper to understand the presentation of dark-skinned characters on the screen.

Media Representation Theory

The representation theory suggests how media represents topics like gender, ethnicity, identity, social issues and events to the general audience. According to the theorist Stuart Hall, representation is the ability to describe or imagine. Representations have the power to influence the audience and alter the facts. The audience receives information about an individual, a social group or an event through the way it is communicated in the media. This builds up assumptions and expectations about that particular subject among the audience. False representations, thus will lead to the generation of prejudices and biases. The key processes in media representation include construction, mediation, selection, anchorage, stereotypes and ideology.

Charles Sanders Pierce's Semiotic Theory

The semiotic theory by Charles Sanders Pierce suggests, the sign has a triadic relationship that forms a structure including sign (representamen), object, interpretant. The sign is as same as a signifier. It represents something. According to Pierce, the sign is only capable to represent the object but never building a connection with it. An object is the subject matter of a sign. It determines the sign. And an interpretant is what we understand from the sign-object relation. It is the intended meaning out of the signification.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework formed is a combination of the media representation theory and semiotics. This is being applied in the content analysis part of the study. The central characters in the three films are taken as the signs that represent and convey matters. The features and the presentation of these characters are the subject matter (the objects) of the analysis. The meaning conveyed from these depictions and features is the interpretants. The signs can be constructed and mediated in particular ways of preference. These ways are also taken into consideration. The choices made to determine the features of the characters are also analysed. The dialogues are the anchorage. The intended meanings comprise the stereotypes and ideologies communicated by the creators to the audience.

Data Analysis and Findings

A questionnaire comprising 15 questions was circulated through Google forms among 100 participants to receive their opinions regarding the topic of study. Among them, 32 were Media students chosen to strengthen the data collected since the subject of study falls under the media-related courses.

The paper was successful in proving the existence of stereotypes and offensive representation in the Indian film industry. 91 respondents accepted the existence of stereotypes in the films while showcasing such characters. One of the specific objectives of the paper was to investigate the stereotypical portrayal of people who belong to lower castes, have low socio-economic backgrounds or are from the rural parts of the country as dark-skinned. While evaluating these characters, it became clear that all these characters have something in common, either they belonged to a lower caste, or they had a low socio-economic background. From the side participants, around 84 of them agreed that dark-skinned people are stereotypically portrayed as people from the inner parts of the country, 77 opined that they are shown as ones with low socio-economic background and 94 suggested they are repetitively portrayed as individuals from low caste communities.

Another observation that was brought out during the study was how elite-class individuals were frequently showcased as light-skinned on the screen. The observation was reinforced by 95 respondents reinstating this depiction as a stereotype.

Brownfacing

The act of brown facing is another phenomenon that the research paper tried to investigate. The act of brown facing is much more dangerous than we think as it reduces the opportunities for dark-skinned actors in the industry. The question about how creators decide to brownface which

character itself arises another question on the factors determining the characters to be brownfaced. Undoubtedly, these factors will be based on the biases and prejudices they hold in their minds. In most cases, the characters who are being darkened will belong to indigenous groups, lower castes, lower class, et.

The stereotypical depiction of lower-class people as dark-skinned can be the only reason why Hrithik Roshan is brownfaced in the entire movie. To indicate that he belongs to a lower caste and has a weak socio-economic background, the creators of the film might have decided to brown-face the actor. It juxtaposes reality because the real-life Anand Kumar on whom the movie is based has a skin tone much lighter than what's shown in the movie. Associating one's body colour with the caste that person belongs to is illogical and outcomes in a prejudiced mind.

Bala by Amar Kaushik is another movie that again propagates brown facing through a strong character Latika who is vocal about racism and body shaming throughout the movie. The role of Latika is being played by actor Bhumi Pednekar who in reality has a much lighter skin tone than the role portrayed by her. The creators failed to cast a dark-skinned actor in the movie to talk about the racism faced by the community and how they're rejected by society. When the whole movie tried to profess their take on racism, they did it by eliminating the chance of a representative. This derives a question - how are we then supposed to fight the discrimination in society, if not by giving fair representation?

In the Movie, Gully Boy too, the central character Murad played by Ranveer Singh is brownfaced. The depiction is the result of a perception that the person belonging to such a cultural background should always be in dark skin tone.

Gendered Colourism

A significant finding made during the study was discovering the concept of gendered colourism in colourism. The intersectionality of gender and colourism results in women to bear greater penalties compared to men as a result of misogyny and patriarchy. In the movies, Super 30 and Gully Boy, both male leads are paired with light-skinned female leads played by Alia Bhatt and Mrinal Thakur. Also, both of them belong to elite classes compared to the of male characters. The central character Latika played by Bhumi Padnekar in the movie Bala (2019), is represented as a successful lawyer who is financially independent and strong enough. But throughout the film, she is been succumbed to the pressures put on her by family and society. The security she holds, the secure job she has, the independence she built around, everything gets vanished in the air when it comes to the topic of marriage. The societal pressures and hazards a black-skinned woman goes through in the patriarchal world are exhausting and inconceivable.

Conclusion

The study was successful in restating the act of brown facing a racist practice. The continuous stereotyped association of caste, class, skin colour is also explored throughout the research. The study was able to conclude that dark-skinned people are often depicted as a weak, malnourished, subaltern class. A thorough reading through the related papers gave an understanding of gendered colourism, which describes how dark-skinned women endure higher consequences of colourism compared to dark-skinned men due to the existence of patriarchy. A striking observation from the study was to realize how common it is in films to pair a dark-skinned male lead with a light-skinned female lead but never a dark-skinned female lead with a light-skinned male lead.

The general treatment of skin colour was 'white' being the superior colour and 'black' as the inferior one was reflected throughout the films. A person's thoughts which are at times prejudiced and biased will reflect in his/her/their work. The same applies to cinema. A change in such misrepresentation is only possible through a change in the mindsets of content creators, which will later result in well-researched, inclusive narratives.

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