

Free Market Feminism and Breaking Stereotypes: From Four More Shots to Kabir Singh

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Article Info

Volume 81

Page Number: 1306 – 1309

Publication Issue:

November-December 2019

Abstract

The discourse of feminism is overpowered by breaking of stereotypes and is seldom rooted in the real empowerment. The free market feminism heavily relies on personal freedom and pleasures and ignore the larger aim of liberation of women. The paper seeks to establish that the media and market play a vital role in diverting the attention of women movement to breaking stereotypes and do little for achieving all round women empowerment. The undue attention to stereotypes lead to rise of gender based violence. It is illustrated through a mainstream Hindi film “Kabir Singh” and an online web series “Four More Shots Please”. The paper is divided into four parts, first part summarises the free market feminism, the second part discusses gender and stereotypes, third part discusses relationship between patriarchy and media and finally the last part concludes that the discourse need to shift to real women empowerment through addressing real gender problems.

Article History

Article Received: 3 April 2019

Revised: 25 June 2019

Accepted: 28 September 2019

Publication: 28 November 2019

Keywords: gender, stereotypes, media, free market feminism, patriarchy.

1. Introduction

The Amazon Prime recently launched a new online web series called as “Four More Shots Please”. It is a story of friendship of four independent women who are not flawless and are unapologetic about their choices in life. It depicts how they fall and rise together in the course of their lives in Mumbai. The story revolves around four women, one of them is a successful journalist who struggles with her very unstable personal life, and second one is a divorcee who is still unable to detach herself from her ex-husband. The third girl is a small town physical trainer who is lesbian in a closet and lastly the fourth girl is overweight who grapples with her unbearable mother. All four of them find recluse in drinks, free sex and partying every other day. The series has been applauded for breaking gender stereotypes. The series also boasts of a female led cast and crew. According

to the producer of the show Pritish Nandy *Four More Shots Please* is a true depiction of millennials living in South Mumbai, who are fearless, unabashed and are brimming with confidence and courage. They might seem unattached but these four women stick together in good as well as in bad times (Indian Express: 2018). Pritish Nandy speaks of “South Bombay” as a representation of women of India. The story of FMSP cannot and should not be accepted as a story of women in India. Feminist movement in India has always been criticised of not representing women from all walks of life. Women from minority, adivasis, dalit groups are not well represented. Indian feminist movement has been a duplication of liberal feminism which relies heavily on individual abilities to reclaim freedom and rights. However, the women empowerment agenda remains unfulfilled if the

capabilities of majority of women are not built upon. (Nussbaum & Sen:1993)

2. Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes can be understood as ascribing specific roles, attributes, characteristics to men and women solely on the basis of their gender (OHCHR). For example attributing childcare, housework to women, considering male member of the house as head of the family are few examples of gender stereotyping. The States usually don't disturb the gender stereotypes. Lately, media has started depicting free sex, getting sloshed on drinks, skin show as breaking gender stereotypes. The agenda of "breaking stereotypes" is guided by the spirit of "free market". It is also loosely defined as free market feminism. Free market feminism believes that the market will lead to the liberation of women (McCloskey:2000). In the words of Manzano ,

Free market feminism focuses on personal freedoms instead of women's rights, personal manoeuvring instead of structural oppression, and personal choices instead of collective action. Under the lens of free-market feminism, "independence" doesn't mean liberation and self-actualization. The free-market feminist spin on "independence" emphasizes detachment and equanimity. It's a dehumanizing interpretation. Not needing other people is exalted as a virtue. People are like replaceable, interchangeable commodities." (Manzano:2000)

The "free market feminism" is far from the aim of "empowerment" of women. It focuses on already empowered women. UNWOMEN defines women's economic empowerment as enabling women to contribute equally in the markets and exercise their right and control over productive resources like land and participate and contribute equally in economic decision making at all levels of an economy i.e. from family to international institutions. According to this definition woman empowerment is a very systemic agenda which prioritizes health, education, employment over various other offshoots of women empowerment. Although we will not call it as "misleading" but it is surely superficial to be swayed by the agenda of "breaking stereotypes", adopted and fostered by the media.

Developing countries like India are still grappling with graver and more complex challenges like

high girls dropout rate, female foeticide, maternal mortality, rise in sexual offences. The media gimmick to gather all attention around "breaking stereotypes" pushes the agenda in a misleading direction. It cannot be a guiding principle for making of policies, plans for women empowerment. Moreover, it also persuades people to believe that it is "fashionable" to be a feminist. It leaves many beginners who are not professionally trained in gender studies to confuse feminism merely with modernisation. Feminism is much wider and calls for greater responsibility. Modernity is an aspect which feminism promotes but it certainly does not end there. The struggles are much deeper and aimed towards greater autonomy. In a country where khappanchayat, female genital mutilation, marital rape are very creatively left outside the scope of law, mere modernity cannot be decoded as feminism. As a matter of fact, associating "individualism" with liberation weaves a vicious circle of sexism. It is like adopting a male gaze to our very own issues, bodies and agenda. Even if we adopt the "breaking gender stereotypes" approach for a moment, then the question is that can sexuality be adopted to probe more complex issues like marriage, family, desire, access, marginality or censorship. The answers to these issues are connected to sexuality rather than sexuality being the solution.

The breaking away of stereotypes is also celebrated as the reinforcement of "modernity". It is deep rooted in our conviction that we won't make sense unless our arguments are guided by discourse of modernity, objectivity and reason. This leads to women speaking a language which is not yet their own. The need to break away is problematic because without a sense of ourselves, our choices of feminist struggles will always be baseless and based on alien agendas. The sense of oneself as well as the sense of community is integral to the feminist agenda. Even when one is speaking for oneself it should still depict the struggles of women as a community. This community is not a homogeneous group; it consists of women from different backgrounds, struggles and life histories. The breaking away of stereotypes can also be guided in other directions which are grounded in harsh realities of life like freedom to marry, freedom to choose career, freedom to choose work over motherhood etc. However, it usually overshadows the real issues.

3. Patriarchy and Media

An aim which is common to all kinds of feminism is the fall of patriarchy which might ultimately lead to social change. The breaking of stereotypes fails to make a dent on patriarchy, rather as a reaction to it, patriarchy resurges in stronger and uglier manner. The rise of sexual offences against women can be related to this phenomenon. Sylvia Walby (1989:214) describes six structures of patriarchy: *“the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions, such as religion, the media and education”*. She says that patriarchy can take different forms. The elimination of one form does not lead to the demise of the system as a whole.

According to MacKinnon (1982), sexuality is central to determining the extent and manners in which patriarchy will unfold in society. Sexuality determines the relationship between men and women. It contributes to objectification of women, which also leads to subordination of women to men. This makes the society patriarchal in which there is largely no real difference between sexuality and gender. The patriarchal society normalises hetero-sexuality and establishes it as its structure with gender and family as its congealed forms. It enforces and generalises sex roles (MacKinnon, 1982:516). Thus, feminism is nothing but holding and distributing power which usually ends up being with men. This also leads to weaving and strengthening of stereotypes like gender roles, heterosexuality etc.

As and when the feminist movement has made waves, it is resisted by excessive violence against women. It is then met with over criminalization. In India, past few decades witnessed different wrongs being declared as crimes against women like sexual harassment at workplace, domestic violence, stalking, voyeurism etc. However, this has not resulted in curbing the violence against women. Probably, because the feminist agenda in India always kept on swinging between breaking stereotypes and merely churning out pro women laws and never managed to hit nail on its head. States seldom try to smash patriarchy. For example, India although increased the maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks (Maternity Benefit Amendment Act, 2017) but chose not to introduce the idea of paternity leave.

Thus, patriarchy remains unaffected and hits back whenever the society seems to be over involved in breaking stereotypes. In 2019, a Hindi movie Kabir Singh was released. It is a remake of Telugu blockbuster Arjun Reddy. Kabir Singh is also a blockbuster and is one of the biggest hits of this year. In the era when most of the Bollywood superstars are going overboard with doing films with nationalist or so called feminist agendas, Kabir Singh celebrates the machismo and misogyny of the protagonist who scares a girl with knife to undress for him or runs after his housemaid for breaking a glass, because he is unable to handle the heartbreak. The protagonist declared the leading lady as his *“bandi”* and the girl also falls for him without questioning any of his moves. The movie is hailed as a super hit and a great love story but also severely criticised for being misogynist. The director of the movie in an interview with Film Companion went on record to say that there is no love if lovers cannot hit each other in love (Film Companion:2019). I see it as metamorphosis of patriarchy. The society has not changed a bit and is still patriarchal. The guys enjoyed the movie because what they are unable to do in real life due to several laws, protagonist does all that on screen and is hailed as a *“hero”*. Girls on the other hand ended up liking the movie because we are still not over the idea of loving a *“macho man”*. The age old doctrine of *“Stockholm syndrome”* i.e. loving the abuser still finds its imprints in our society. So no matter stalking is a crime but few cases might end up as love stories.

4. Conclusion

This raises serious concerns about the feminist agenda. If feminism is reaction to patriarchy then the impact is lukewarm. We got entangled with the efforts to break stereotypes and making and amending laws. We seldom pondered over that whether our policies are women centric or what can be done to strike down patriarchy bit by bit. Patriarchy is always jealously guarded by the State. It also raises concern about the priorities of the women movement, which focuses on breaking stereotypes and several critical areas remain out of focus. This ensures negligible impact of women movement on the position of women in society as only already *“capable women”* are involved in breaking gender stereotypes. It is because of this reason that Indian women largely remain ignorant of concepts like feminism or women rights and it

largely ends up being a trend and not a catalyst of social change. The popular media also encashes both the trends, feminist as well as patriarchal as it has to cater to both kinds of audience.

Thus, the State will keep churning out laws and progressive judgments like abolition of triple talaq, allowing women in Sabrimala temple, decriminalising adultery, decriminalising homosexuality. Who will ensure the implementation of these laws and judgments? Moreover, failures of State to criminalise marital rape, pass women reservation bill, recognise paternity leave, criminalise khapanchayats raises serious concerns about its feminist agenda. It can be concluded that the State policies and initiatives are guided by free market feminism. It wilfully chooses never to hit the bull's eye and fall of patriarchy is still a farfetched dream.

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