

The Portrayal of Eunuchs in Bollywood

Hands clapping, gruff and hoarse voices singing in unison, teasing the heroine or the villain with lewd remarks and gestures, mainly to support the hero or on his behalf – this is how eunuchs are generally portrayed in Bollywood movies. In Hindi films, they bear the brunt of crude jokes and are generally shown as buffoons and objects to be made fun of.

In mainstream Hindi cinema, eunuchs have so far existed more as clowns than humans with hearts. During the 'Golden Era' of Bollywood, i.e. the period from mid 50s to mid 70s, eunuchs were generally shown as companions to heroines, similar to those of queens in harems. Actors, mainly lowly rated comedians, would cross-dress with deliberate crudity so as not to be mistaken for a woman but taken for a eunuch in an attempt to evoke laughter. Even the legendary Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan has been guilty of this offence. One can easily remember his '*Mere angane mein*' number from the 1981 super hit '*Lawaaris*'. The late Prakash Mehra, producer and director of the film made extra efforts to make the megastar look as ugly, repulsive and bizarre as possible in that song. From the star's exaggerated gestures, flashy make-up and lewd gestures, it was clear that he was not trying to act like a woman but was actually mimicking a eunuch. Barring a few examples, the scenario has not changed much as yet, be it Govinda in '*Aunty No 1*' or Ajay Devgan, Tushar Kapoor etc. in '*Golmaal Return*'. The majority of Bollywood actors are guilty of portraying eunuchs in a highly demeaning manner. Movies might be entertaining to watch but are they fair in their treatment of eunuchs?

It was the late comedy actor Mehmood who for the first time represented eunuchs in a respectable manner in his block-buster "*Kunwara Baap*". He turned the tide, using real eunuchs for a longish song and dance number in this movie. Perhaps, for the first time ever, *hijras* were happy to be a part of a Bollywood movie, never mind if it was just one loud song in a lengthy film. Post the liberalization of 1991, the scenario changed a little bit for the better. A new breed of rebellious movie makers represented eunuchs as normal human beings and not as clowns.

For the first time in the history of Bollywood, movie maker Mahesh Bhatt cast actor Sadashiv Amrapurkar as *Maharani*, a eunuch who was the lead villain of the movie 'Sadak'. The portrayal fetched the actor the coveted Filmfare award. But the role did little to improve the image of eunuchs in society, since *Maharani* in *Sadak* came across as a vile, inhuman specimen. Once again, the rebel in Mahesh Bhatt showed courage and he made the much appreciated 'Tamanna' based on the real life of a eunuch 'Tiku'. The real life to reel life role transition was effected brilliantly by the versatile Paresh Rawal, The character underscored the fact that often, people born genetically as men may be physical embodiments of manhood but in their hearts and souls, they are without a clear gender - transgendered people. Tiku was more of a man than all the men put together in the film yet had to bear the taunts of his own community in addition to the harassment by 'normal' folk. In contrast to this stellar role, Rawal has also been guilty of mocking eunuchs through his role of a pseudo-eunuch in Umesh Mehra's multistar debacle 'Vardi'.

Kalpana Lajmi's 'Darmiyani' was a brave movie which was based on the relationship of a mother, an actor by profession and her eunuch child, portrayed by Kirron Kher and the late Nirmal Pandey. Mani Ratnam's 'Bombay' was also such a film which showed that a eunuch can be tender as well. In a touching scene from this movie, based on the 1992-93 communal riots of Mumbai, one of these often ridiculed souls offers shelter to the twins born to a Hindu father and a Muslim mother. Through this well sketched scene, Mani Ratnam proved a point that this was only human being who was not bothered about the community or religion of the kids.

In the recent times, movies like *Shabnam Mausi* and *Welcome to Sajjanpur* were landmark films, in the sense they showed eunuchs as clean politicians, mirroring real life incidents of eunuchs winning elections. It is a common feeling that the whole political class is corrupt and the cause of this corruption is greed, to provide best of the world to near and dear ones. On the contrary, eunuchs who don't have families to feed or kids to support, can be very good politicians, devoid of any lust and greed.

While sympathy towards eunuchs is a recent one or two decade old phenomenon in Bollywood, its western counterpart, Hollywood has always been more or less sympathetic to the community. Movies like *Between the Lines - India's Third Gender*, *Bombay Eunuch*, *Butterfly Sword*, *Eunuch of Western Palace*, *Harem*, *Better than Chocolate*, *Big City Blue*, *Buffalo Girls*, *Just Like a Woman*, *Lai Shi*, *China's Last Eunuch*, *The Half Naked Truth*, etc. portrayed the cause of eunuchs and TG/TS in a far more sensitive manner.

Bollywood is more liberal towards accommodating eunuchs, TG and TS people as compared to society in general. Here, they are employed as hair dressers, choreographers, make-up artists etc. India in general and Bollywood in particular need more Mahesh Bhatt's and Mani Ratnam's to portray eunuchs in a sensitive manner, in line with their western counterparts.