

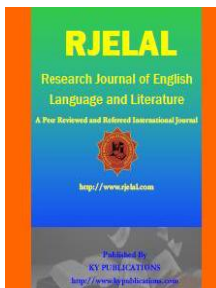


SELF EMPOWERMENT- REDISCOVERING LOST IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

To empower women does not only mean making them equal to men. It does not mean revolting against the dominance of the male. It also means giving women the liberty to take their own decisions, stand up & speak for themselves. It stresses the need to make women self reliant & self dependent. The Protagonists of the two movies, Queen (2014) & English Vinglish (2012) do just the same. This paper delves deep into the storyline of each film to analyse & compare the ways in which Rani (Queen) & Shashi (English Vinglish), turn themselves from meek, feeble-minded women to strong, empowered women.

Keywords: Empowerment, Women, Liberty, Decisions, Strong.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminism & women empowerment are issues of table talk these days. Women are being made aware of their rights, their strengths & their equality with men on all the fronts. It is harder for a woman to survive in this big bad world dominated by men. It is even harder for an Indian woman to struggle for her identity in the Patriarchal society. Still, a woman, held in reverence as Goddess Shakti & Saraswati, has the potential to break open all the chains which are drawing her back, to realise her own true self.

It is an irony of fate that a female who is worshipped as Mother & Deity, is oblivious to her own true self. Conditioned by family & society, she tends to believe that she can nowhere exist without the support of her husband, or son or brother or any other male. A female's identity is said to be an offshoot of a male's identity in society.

Women Empowerment refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal

strength of the women, to ensure equal-right to women, and to make them confident enough to claim their rights, such as:

- freely live their life with a sense of self-worth, respect and dignity,
- have complete control of their life, both within and outside of their home and workplace,
- to make their own choices and decisions,
- have equal rights to participate in social, religious and public activities,
- have equal social status in the society,
- have equal rights for social and economic justice,
- determine financial and economic choices,
- get equal opportunity for education,
- get equal employment opportunity without any gender bias,
- get safe and comfortable working environment

Apart from all these points regarding women, the top one is that Women have the right to get their voices heard.

Women empowerment pertains to the freedom which a woman has in lieu of making her own decisions regarding her life & living. Empowerment means that a woman has full charge of her own life & her family. A woman is truly empowered when she is given recognition & appreciation with regard to all her qualities, her talents & attributes.

Time & again this theme has been raised & depicted in the world of Literature & the fine arts. Novelists, playwrights & filmmakers have successfully dramatised the issue & put it in varied forms before the audience. Two such films, which depict the transition of their female protagonists from helpless, docile, dependant beings to independent & empowered women, are *Queen* (2014) & *English Vinglish* (2012).

The film *Queen* revolves around Rani Mehra (Kangana Ranaut) who is an under-confident young Punjabi woman from Delhi. She is engaged to Vijay (Rajkumar Rao) & is soon to get married. One day prior to her wedding, he tells her that he no longer wishes to marry her since his stay abroad has changed his lifestyle, tastes, likes & dislikes and her conservative background & habits would be a wrong match for him. Startled by this blunt refusal, Rani shuts herself in her room for a day. The very next day, Rani, wanting to take control of the situation, asks for her parents' permission to go alone on her pre-booked honeymoon to Paris and Amsterdam. After initially hesitating, her parents agree, thinking that a vacation might cheer her up.

In Paris, Rani meets Vijayalakshmi, who also calls herself Vijay (Lisa Haydon), a free-spirited woman of French-Spanish-Indian descent, who works at the hotel in which Rani stays. Overwhelmed by the new city & still not able to overcome to realise that her marriage has been called off, Rani intends to return to India. On top of it all, she gets into trouble while saving herself from a robber who tries to snatch her bag. She feels utterly helpless & plans to go back to India. However Vijayalakshmi helps her out and gives her a tour around the city. The two have a series of

adventures, during which Rani remembers those things which she did not do back home, which were frowned upon by her fiancée, like dancing & drinking & things that she could not do on her own, like crossing the road & driving. During one particular incident, Rani tries on what she considers to be a revealing outfit and accidentally sends a selfie of her, wearing the outfit, to Vijay, instead of Vijayalakshmi. She quickly realises her mistake, but she does not know that her selfie has prompted Vijay to begin searching for her.

Finally, the time comes for her to bid an emotional farewell to Vijayalakshmi and board the train for Amsterdam. When she arrives in Amsterdam, she finds to her horror that her hostel room is being shared with three boys: Taka from Japan, Tim from France and Oleksander from Russia. Despite being hesitant on staying in a room with them, she soon becomes good friends with them, and spends time shopping, sight seeing, visiting a sex shop, and meeting pole dancers in a club. At the club, Rani befriends a pole dancer, Roxette/Rukhsar, who is also a friend of Vijayalakshmi.

Rani is shown slowly to gain confidence by taking control of her decisions. She also realises her cooking prowess by winning a cook-off by selling gol gappas (an Indian street snack). She learns more about her foreigner friends' backgrounds and begins to understand how different life can be for people in other parts of the world. Meanwhile, Vijay, who had been relentlessly searching for Rani after her selfie misadventure, find her in front of the hostel. He apologizes to Rani and asks her to reconsider their relationship. Their conversation escalates as he tries to chide Rani for staying with three males in one room, but her friends retaliate, and she asks him to leave. The two meet up the next day to discuss the future, Vijay is now ready to accept her because he thinks that her dressing habits & lifestyle have become 'modern' & now she fits into his image of an ideal wife; but Rani leaves abruptly, saying that she would rather speak to him after she returns to Delhi. She then meets up with her friends one last time at a rock concert she had previously chosen not to attend. After bidding an emotional farewell to them, Rani returns to India.

Back in Delhi, Rani visits Vijay at his home. Vijay thinks that she has decided to forgive him. Instead, Rani hands him her engagement ring and after saying "thank you", she walks away with a smile on her face.

While in a foreign land, Rani is shown to do everything on her own, including crossing the road, having a job, cooking for a competition & driving a car. These were the bondages that made her dependent on other people, back home. Whenever she tries her hand at something new, she remembers how her fiancée always reacted negatively when she tried to do the same thing in India, for instance, taking a job at a relative's firm. Even when she met Vijay at Amsterdam, he reiterated her need for a husband i.e., himself, to protect her.

The film won accolades for the actors' performance & also for its storyline, soon after its release. The most commendable thing about it is that it depicts very dexterously that modernity is nowhere connected to one's sense of dressing or one's outward appearance. It refers more to one's psychology & mental setup. A woman may dress up simply and plainly, but if she is aware of most of the things happening around her, if she creates an identity of her own, if she is not known by the name of her husband, brother, father or son, if she can think of her own self & take her own decisions, she is both modern & empowered.

The film has changed the concept of empowerment & female emancipation. It stresses on the fact that a woman need not be attached to a man who is indecisive & whose likes & dislikes change at the spur of the moment. A woman's priorities, her opinions come first when she decides as to whom she will choose as her life partner. Nobody, not even her parents, have the right to impose their will on her. It is her life & she will decide whom to spend it with. This stresses the need for women to choose a partner who loves them for who they are, whose choices are not based on outward appearances, who can understand their feelings & emotions, who is not so fickle minded as to snub her on the first day, then sees her photograph in a revealing outfit, & tries to get her again because she has become 'modern' now. Rani

realises this when she talks to Vijay at Amsterdam, & so the first thing that she does after coming back to India is that she returns Vijay's ring. The circle is complete for her. Vijay called off the wedding saying that Rani is no match to his newly acquired mannerisms & lifestyle; Rani rejects Vijay because she thinks that she will not be happy with a person who has now accepted her just because of her 'modern' looks.

Another aspect of empowering of women comes up when a married woman is so much caught up in the web of her married life & family that she forgets to take care of her own self. She take care of the entire family, but when she wants to take out a little time for herself, she raises eyebrows. The situation further aggravates when her own family, husband & children, make fun of her for not knowing 'English'. This is what exactly happens in the movie English Vinglish.

Shashi Godbole (Sridevi) is a housewife who makes and sells laddoos as a home-run business. Her husband Satish, (Adil Hussain) and daughter, Sapna (Navika Kotia) take her for granted, make fun of her poor English skills and generally treat her with contempt, making Shashi feel pessimistic and insecure. However, her young son, Sagar (Shivansh Kotia) loves her as she is, and her mother-in-law (Sulabha Deshpande) offers her words of sympathy.

Shashi's elder sister Manu (Sujatha Kumar), who lives in New York, invites Shashi's family to her daughter Meera's (Neeju Sodhi) wedding to Kevin (Ross Nathan). It is decided that Shashi will go to New York alone to help Manu organize the wedding, and her husband and children will join her later as the wedding approaches. During her flight to America, Shashi is given inspirational advice by a fellow passenger (Amitabh Bachchan/Ajith Kumar).

While Shashi is in New York, she has a traumatic experience at a coffee shop due to her inability to communicate in English. Feeling utterly helpless, she incidentally comes upon a sign on a moving bus for an English speaking class. Using the money she made from selling laddoos, she secretly enrolls in the conversational English class that offers to teach the language in four weeks, showing her resourcefulness at navigating an unfamiliar city alone. The class comprises: David Fischer, the

instructor (Cory Hibbs); Eva, a Mexican nanny (Ruth Aguilar); Salman Khan, a Pakistani cab driver (Sumeet Vyas); Yu Son, a Chinese hairstylist (Maria Romano); Ramamurthy, a Tamil software engineer (Rajeev Ravindranathan); Udumbke, a young African-Caribbean man (Damian Thompson); and Laurent, a French chef (Mehdi Nebbou). On the very first day of her class she has a sense of pride for herself when her instructor & classmates call her an "entrepreneur".

Shashi quickly becomes a promising and committed student. She earns everyone's respect with her charming behaviour and her cuisine, and gains self-confidence. Laurent becomes attracted to Shashi. He tells it to everyone when the teacher asks him about what he likes most about the English class. He says that he comes to the class only because of Shashi. This comes as a shock to Shashi, who has been craving a little bit of appreciation. It is just an irony that instead of getting it from her family, she gets it outside, from a stranger.

Meanwhile, Shashi's niece Radha (Priya Anand) who is Meera's younger sister finds out about her secret English classes and is supportive of her pursuit. Shashi is so dedicated towards learning English that she starts watching English news & films to gain a better understanding of the language. She also does her homework assiduously. To complete the English-speaking course and get a certificate, each student must write and deliver a 5-minute speech. To surprise Shashi her family joins her in New York earlier than planned. She tries to continue attending class, but decides to quit because of schedule conflicts, and asks Radha to inform David Fischer. The test date coincides with that of the wedding, and Shashi is forced to miss the test.

Radha invites David and the entire class to the wedding, where Shashi's husband Satish is taken aback at being introduced to a diverse group of people by his wife as her 'special friends'. Shashi gives a touching and enlightening toast to the married couple in English, surprising everyone who knew her as a typical, conservative, Indian housewife. In her speech, Shashi extols the virtues of being married and having a family, describing the family as a safe space of love and respect where weaknesses are not mocked. Shashi's husband and

daughter regret treating her with disrespect. Her teacher David declares that she has passed the course with distinction and issues her the certificate. Shashi thanks Laurent for "making her feel better about herself". Shashi's family return to India; during their flight home, Shashi asks the flight attendant in fluent English whether she has any Hindi newspapers in Hindi version.

Shashi represents every Indian woman who is surrounded by household chores but who craves to make herself a better person by learning new skills. It is often seen that over the years, people start taking their wives & mothers for granted. They are mistreated, insulted & misbehaved with. All that Shashi expects is a little bit of approval from her family. She herself makes her purpose very clear, when she talks to her niece Radha about Laurent & says that she does not want love, but only some deference & acceptance by her loved ones.

There are a lot of things which are common in both the protagonists in the movies. Both Rani & Shashi have their weaknesses, their limitations & they are aware of that. They know that they cannot step out of the boundaries which are prescribed for them, but still, they have the desire to come out of their bondages- both self imposed & those imposed by society, on them. Both of them challenge their restrictions- the fears that were holding them back & step into the world. Rani goes into a foreign land alone, overcomes all her fears, her inhibitions, faces this challenge called Life and emerges victorious at the end. Shashi becomes triumphant by moving towards her goal of learning 'English'. Shashi & Rani both turned their minor weaknesses into their major strengths & this is what we mean by empowerment.

The two movies depict the concept of empowerment very adequately. Thus Rani & Shashi become the emblem of the 'new woman'- the empowered woman.

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