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Rise of liberation: Feminist influence on the role of Australian women in cinema during 1970s

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Abstract

Cinema and society has been found to influence each other. In this paper the feminist influence on the role of Australian women in cinema has been explored, particularly during the 1970s. Moreover, a comparison between Australian cinema and its American and British counterparts have also been covered. It has been found that during the 1970s, women in Hollywood and British cinema were typically portrayed as an object of desire, where they were mostly cast as supporting characters beside the male protagonist. However, during the same timeframe, the Australian cinema has shown significant strides highlighting the progressiveness of women. During that time the feminist movement was fueled by anger of women toward violence and objectification. The Australian filmmakers portrayed the then ongoing feminist movement on the big screen, thereby telling stories from the female point of view. Even though female characters were brought to the forefront of the script, but their strengths and social positions were still limited by the patriarchal boundaries. Moreover, the portrayal of women was highly fragmented, as their image was defined through several cultural and social relationships. This as a result made it quite challenging for the film makers to portray a one true identity of women. Nonetheless, Australian cinema have had a major impact on uplifting women in the society and have paved the way to strengthen feminist movements.

Keywords: Cinema, feminist, 1970s, Australian filmmakers, portrayal of women, British cinema, gender studies

Introduction

Cinema has a great influence on society and vice versa and also plays a major role in creating social awareness. Films act as an interactive medium that inspires and motivates change in society and can be used as an effective tool to address persisting social issues (Sharma, 2018) ^[20]. Therefore, it is safe to assume that issues of women being put into light during the feminist uprising and women's liberation movement during the 1970s had a great influence on cinema as well. In this context, this paper aims to analyze how women were portrayed in Australian movies during the 1970s and explore whether the rise of the feminist movement had any significant influence on the portrayal of women on screen? This paper seeks to establish that women's movements during the 1970s played an important role in uplifting the status and role of women in Australian society through cinema, and that depiction of women in Australian cinema during that period was impressively progressive despite barriers imposed by patriarchy. The paper will also draw brief comparisons of the Australian cinema with its American and British counterparts to establish the progressiveness of the Australian film industry in the 1970s.

Women in cinema before the 1970s

The female contribution in Australian cinema can be traced back to the 1920s when the filmmakers like Louise Lovely, Lottie Lyell and Mc Donagh sisters picked up their cameras even during the silent era of filmmaking. Women never played the weaker sex or the 'beauty without brains' role in these movies; rather, the women filmmakers in Australia were always keen on uplifting the status of women and portraying them as independent beings (Heathcote, 2018) ^[10]. 'Jewelled Nights' filmed by Louise Lovely was one such movie that portrayed the strength and resilience of women as it demonstrated the story of women who disguised themselves as men to work in the Tasmania mines after abandoning their marriage (Delamoire, 2012) ^[8]. Given the real social circumstances of the woman during that time, the women in cinema came out as larger than life who were motivated by the same things in life such as men and reeked independence (Blonski *et al.*, 1987) ^[5].

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Despite the strong female representation in the early years of Australian cinema, this portrayal was often overlooked and as more and more American exhibitors took over the film industry, the Australian films began to get locked out. This led to a major gap in the production of Australian movies since the 1920s which led to a decline in the portrayal of strong and independent Australian women as well. However, the Australian film industry gained new momentum during the 1970s as Australians began to resist American hegemony and started demanding Australian stories. Fortunately, this revived demand for Australian movies also coincided with the rising feminist movement during the 1970s. Therefore Australian movies during the 1970s were heavily influenced by feminism and the women's movement (Heathcote, 2018) ^[10].

The Feminist Narrative

As more and more British, American and Canadian women organized themselves for the feminist movement in the late 1960s, Australian women also got inspired to address the persisting oppressive social conditions in the country which gave life to the women's liberation movement in Australia in the 1970s (12). Feminist ideologies were not a new concept in Australia, however, the seventies decade looked significantly different from the past eras of feminism as it challenged the longstanding ideas of national belonging and citizenship. It enlarged the Australian feminist's perspective beyond an economic and political dysfunction and influence change in the boundary between 'public' and 'private'. Apart from suffrage rights, other issues that were highlighted during the 1970s feminist movements included the provision of child care, decriminalization of homosexuality and abortion law reform (Arrow, 2019) ^[2].

The 1970s women's movement was also largely driven by the anger of women against the prevailing objectification of women's bodies, violence against women, sexual harassment and sexual double standards. There was a growing urge among feminists to shock the spectators and making them hear their 'roar'. Women were being paid less than men for their work, struggling as single mothers and experiencing social exclusion. Therefore, women began to search for various means to ventilate their rage and make the nation hear their contentions. Cinema was on such means through which women strived to establish their independence and demands of liberation (Woollacott & Staff, 2021) ^[26]. With this new hope of liberation, another common theme that emerged in feminist liberation ideas during the 1970s was the idea of sisterhood. This sisterhood encouraged women in Australia to support each other against sexism, which was widely depicted through the roles of women in Australian cinema during the 1970s (Magarey, 2014; Petro, 2000) ^[12, 17].

The rise in the feminist movement and ideas of women's liberation marked the renaissance of the Australian film industry and the representation of women in the Australian cinema during the 1970s (Magarey, 2004) ^[11]. In lieu of this feminist film production in Australia during this period experienced a double movement. The first was a struggle for Australian women to gain access to the production of the film which involves an exercise of discrimination in the training courses and lobbying of government funds. The second was a struggle in terms of image formation in the cinema. The older images of women in cinema which were influenced by a dominant patriarchal perspective and

depicted women as means to beautify the screen by acting as a supporting character for the male protagonist was heavily criticized. Instead, there was an increasing focus on producing alternative images of women that presented women's vision of themselves (Stern, 2010) ^[23]. These new alternative images of women in cinema were not limited to Australia. During the 1970s even the American and British films experienced a wave of feminism as they continued their fight against the Mad Men-esque cinema that represented a man's world and took a strong stand for women's liberation (Specter, 2020) ^[22]. Therefore, the onscreen representation of women in Australian movies during the 1970s was similar to that of representation of women in American and British cinema.

The 1970s presented Australian filmmakers, especially women filmmakers with immense opportunities to tell their stories to the audience. Many feminist films began to be produced as a part of the Experimental Film fund that paved the way for exploring the examining the roles of women in society and led to new ideas that raised the consciousness of the society. The subjects of such cinema range from examining the role of women in the home, in the workplace and constituted new ideologies of social reform. The 1970s cinemas also explored the issue of objectification of the female body. This encouraged women to reinvent their images and realize their true potential that combined filmmaking with activism and liberation (Tomsic, 2007) ^[24]. However, there was a major difference between the Australian women filmmakers and the American and British contemporaries. Unlike, the American and British contemporaries who followed a hierarchical structure in the film industry and produced more sombre films, the Australian feminist filmmakers adopted a collective model and demonstrated more verve in liberating women through cinema (McFarlane & Mayer, 1992; NFSA, 2021) ^[13, 15].

Despite the growing influence of feminism in Australian cinema, the representation and subsequent image remained largely fragmented. The image of women is culturally and socially constructed through various social practices and relationships. Therefore, it was not possible for the filmmakers in the 1970s to capture one true identity of Australian women. The dismantling of the persisting patriarchal linguistic structures demands immense struggle and therefore a large proportion of the female image continued to be suppressed by patriarchy. It is important to note that cinemas are also a form of text that produces different meanings while utilizing a variety of languages and social structures which are constantly restructured within a society, which reinforces the fact that women's images are constructed culturally. This automatically gives rise to a juxtaposition which is evident in the different images of women portrayed in cinema during the 1970s (Stern, 2010) ^[23].

Closer look at women in Australian cinema

As stated above the image of women in Australian cinema during the 1970s was heavily influenced by feminist uprisings and the rise of the women's liberation movement. One of the most significant Australian cinema in this respect, which has marked its legacy of female empowerment in the feminist history of Australia is *Caddie* (1976) ^[7], directed by Anthony Buckley. It was one of the few Australian movies that portrayed a female protagonist and uplifted the status of women in cinema from merely a

supporting character to someone who is the centre piece of the entire film (Blackshaw, 2021) ^[4]. *Caddie* (1976) ^[7] portrayed the struggle of a single mother in Australia during the great depression and is iconic in the sense that it depicts the strength of an independent woman who does not require a male counterpart for survival. Another Australian cinema that holds Australian women in empowered light is *My Brilliant Career* (1979) ^[1] which depicts the aspirations of the female writer in 19th century rural Australia that is impeded not only by oppressive social circumstances but also impeded by the presence of a romantic partner. It was one of the few cinemas during that time that depicted role reversal with women as the protagonist and the male actor as the 'eye candy'. The movie bred a fearless unapologetic female character whose aspirations expanded beyond homemaking or pleasing a man and matched the same levels as the aspirations of men during the 1970s Australian society (Rickey, 2019) ^[18].

Another iconic cinema in Australia that was able to paint a new picture of 'girls' in Australia was *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977) ^[3] based on a novel by the same title authored by Henry Handel Richardson. The film depicted young women's struggles with conformity, acceptance, friendship and romance in a Melbourne based boarding school. The narrative presented in the film did not fit the earlier narratives of school stories of British girls that were established during the early 20th century as it broke the existing conventional norms. The film upheld women's liberation by encouraging the audience to value the minor rebellious acts of the female protagonist. The story of Laura in *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977) ^[3] is one of the few stories that attract attention towards the beautiful concept of a girl's maturation as opposed to more common stories that only depicted 'boys becoming men' (Smith, 2014) ^[21].

In a way, Australian cinema during the 1970s was significantly more progressive than their American and British counterparts. There were movies like *Women Reply* (1975) ^[25] and *Norma Rae* (1979) ^[19] which portrayed strong female characters and presented an image of brilliant independent women; however, these movies failed to receive much mainstream attention and the popularity was snatched by movies like *The Godfather* (1972) ^[6] which had no place for women. These Hollywood movies presented a weak image of women who were supposedly dependent on the spurious protection of the men. These films blatantly closed doors on girlfriends, wives and mothers even during a time when the women's movement was gaining momentum (Haskell, 1997) ^[9]. Despite the progressive nature of Australian cinema during the 1970s, it would be unfair to say the Australian film industry broke the shackles of patriarchy and its ideas about women. As noted by Stern (2010) ^[23], the juxtaposition of the female image in Australian movies was widely evident with movies like *Caddie* (1976) ^[7] or *The Brilliant Career* (1979) ^[1] on one hand liberating women while movies like *Mad Max* (1979) and *Scobie Malone* (1975) ^[16] painting the age-old picture of women as the crutch of beauty for the movie on the other hand.

In *Scobie Malone* (1975) ^[16], women were heavily objectified as means of sexual desire. The women in the movie merely played a supporting character with a promiscuous role of a prostitute that served the heroic gestures of the male protagonist. *Mad Max* (1979), one of the most iconic films in the history of Australian cinema did

no better. The post-apocalyptic film, often considered a cult classic failed to frame women in a positive light that matches feminist ideologies. The role of women in the movie was limited to dying to give purpose to the male protagonist in the movie for his actions. This again reinforced the idea of women being the weaker sex. However, one has to agree that the liberation of women and ending oppressive patriarchy is a slow process, be it through social movements or cinema. Therefore, despite the prevalence of depiction of women in supporting characters to add beauty to cinema and nothing else, the efforts of feminist filmmakers and their portrayal of strong women on-screen during the 1970s cannot be dismissed.

Conclusion

Women in mainstream cinema primarily played supporting characters to the male protagonist and were used to add beauty to the screen. However, the Australian filmmakers came a long way during the 1970s to bring the ongoing feminist movements to screen and tell stories to the audience from a female point of view. During the 1970s, the feminist filmmakers were presented with immense opportunities to present their works which helped to portray women in a new light as they were depicted as strong independent women whose lives were not limited to pleasing men. However, this representation of women's strength was fairly limited in mainstream cinema, especially action movies like *Mad Max* where women continued to be defined within the barriers of patriarchal ideologies. However, despite the barriers, the discussion suggests that women's movements during the 1970s indeed played an important role in uplifting the status and role of women in Australian society through cinema; and that depiction of women in Australian cinema during that period was impressively progressive.

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