

Superbride, or a little about Modern Uzbek Cinema

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Abstract

The female image in cinema has always been a reflection of socio-political transformation, thus, changes in the social status of women are directly related to their artistic representation. The image of a modern Uzbek woman in cinema combines traditionalism peculiar to the Central Asian region and glamorous femininity inspired by the West. Although the female image has undergone diversification in commercial film production, the willingness to build a family remains an integral part of women's aspirations and desires. The search for personal happiness as a wife and mother is an obligatory element of the plot narrative, and success in personal life despite various circumstances is almost the only possible happy ending for a female protagonist. In the latest art cinema, there is a general trend toward the reverse evolution of the female image—from a modern woman to a traditional one. In these movies, spiritual values, morality, and traditions as the principal factor of society's well-being are brought to the foreground, while female characters are mostly depicted in a traditional environment and within an ethnographic context.

This paper mainly focuses on Bakhrom Yakubov's film Superbride (2008), which became a national hit and box-office sensation in the domestic market. Superbride is a particularly successful example of a fiction film that through the prism of youth comedy promotes an ideal and frankly banal female image based on patriarchal mentality.

Keywords

Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Cinema, Film Studies, Feminism, Women, Gender Inequality

Introduction

After undergoing many significant changes, the Uzbek republic demonstrated a remarkable female transformation from a secluded Muslim wife to an emancipated woman. Uzbek women were always an integral part of national cinema. Having passed through unveiling campaign of social and intellectual “liberation” in the 1920s, Soviet times, and crisis years after independence the female image has always served as a reflection of every era, “in transition periods – defenseless, in a stable society – strong, beloved, and socially active”.¹ The transformation of the female character in different periods is very indicative: from an unhappy wife to emancipated Soviet woman, from fabric girl to mother, from an unstable woman to socially active. In the 1920s and 1930s, one of the main campaigns was *Hujum* (attack, assault) aimed at changing the situation of women in a patriarchal community through mass unveiling. The Communist Party made

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an attempt to modernize the Central Asian region, and it was believed that the *Hujum* movement would mobilize local women “under the message of equality and liberation for the female sex”.² Since it was considered as a “catalyst to a complete societal and political change”³, the government has created special places of employment “such as collective farms that employed women only”⁴ to help them integrate into the social structure. Therefore, reflecting policy on the liberation of indigenous female population film industry widely exploited the plots about the “hell” and “paradise” of two women: the story of an unhappy Uzbek woman oppressed by husband, traditions, and unlike her, a happy emancipated Soviet woman”⁵. In Soviet times, the woman representations were reduced to a few clichés: “liberated woman of the East”, shock worker at the factory, “fighter - heroic daughter of the people”⁶, or the grieving mother. The images of liberated women and factory girls are primarily related to policies towards the employment of the female part of population, including Muslim women. This was due to labor shortages, as there were more women than men in the Soviet Union after World War II. At the same time, another image was also associated with post-war consequences – the mother who lost her son in the war. The period of *Perestroika* has brought uncertain female characters on screens – suffering and unprotected as the embodiment of the time of instability.

The period of independence is characterized by the so-called politics of national revival, specific features of which were distancing from the Soviet past, return to the roots, and romanticization of archaic. Since home and family are two concepts that form the basis of any society, in the early years of independence the image of the mother becomes central in the Uzbek cinema. In general, the idea of the 'natural purpose of a woman' was dominant in all post-Soviet countries, however, in the Central Asian region, it was burdened by a nationalist idea, so local mass media required a 'truly Uzbek woman' to play the traditional role of mistress of the house and educator of children. The building of a strong family is often compared to a state-building, thus, having a full family is compared to harmony and well-being in society. Therefore, the mother embodied the ideology of nation-building as she appeared to be a keeper of family, bearer of traditions and national values which were placed at the head of politics.

Commercial films of the 2000s

In the 2000s, Uzbek film officials introduced a “Bollywoodization” system that redefined the domestic film market. The cinema industry of Uzbekistan has adopted the experience of Indian cinema and applied it to local production. Uzbek studios produced films for a growing domestic audience creating one of the most profitable markets in Central Asia. Quantity in this situation did not always mean quality, and the standard was generally comparable with soap opera-style melodramas – a preferred genre in which filmmakers expressed themselves. Film critics stated that while the number of Uzbek films was increasing, the budget was usually low. After a period of stagnation and crisis during the first years after the independence, the Uzbek film industry entered the revival stage partly due to the emergence of cheap digital technology, which has allowed the production of hundreds of films over the past decade. Following the formula of low-budget melodramas, the wave of commercial films provided fairytale storylines with pathetic actors and exaggerated characters, or similar to each other Cindrella or Romeo &

Juliet-sque love stories where the girl is rich and the man is poor or vice versa, while the main antihero was represented by a mother-in-law, stepmother, or failed fiancé.

Today's Uzbek society is primarily dominated by the influence of two mentalities – ethnic and religious, although Uzbek people have also felt the influence of the West that is often reflected in modern films. “Ethnic” encompasses historical experience as traditional views, customs, regional mentality, whereas “religious” predominantly refers to Muslims, as Uzbekistan is a country where the majority of the population practice Islam. Partial westernization proclaimed the building of a secular society, which also affected the appearance of the local women: fashion outfits, high heels, ability to wear shorts and bright makeup, botox lips, and fake lashes. On the wave of the progressive social changes, Uzbek commercial films of the XXI century introduced diverse female portrayals: revengeful daughters (*Fatima and Zuhra, Sogdiana, Homicidal*), fatal beauties (*Sogdiana, Payback for Adultery*), tender sweethearts (*Romeo and Juliet, The Heart is Crying*), spoiled rich girls (*Groom for Rent, Super Servant*), loyal girlfriends (*Insane, Daddy, Consequences*), modern brides opposing a traditional mother-in-law (*Superbride, Fighting Mother-in-Law*), and unhappy Cinderellas (*Zumrad and Qimmat, The Flaw*). Unhappy love stories, where a priority of the family triggers an inner conflict between love and family obligations, achieved special success with a domestic audience and gained huge popularity among Uzbek youth (*Fatima and Zuhra, Sogdiana, Romeo and Juliet, Insane*, etc.). Although contemporary film projects presented rich variations of female characters, one trait remains unchanged – the protagonist is a modern girl whose main purpose is creating a family. To some extent, the line of the mother as a tradition-keeper continues in up-to-date cinema.

***Superbride* – comedy on a familiar topic**

However, amid tear melodramas and unhappy love stories, Bakhrom Yakubov's *Superbride* was the most successful commercial hit since it promoted an ideal woman image through the prism of comedy, and all film events were presented with sparkling humor. Diana and Sardor meet in a bowling club and to the displeasure of their parents very quickly decide to get married. Diana, who grew up in a non-traditional environment, finds it difficult to build good relationships with Sardor's mother Munira-opa. With the study of the national traditions of Uzbekistan, Diana is trying to find an approach to a strict mother-in-law.

Yakubov tells the story of an interracial marriage, where contrasting cultural and ethnic values evoke the discontent between two families: Sardor belongs to a typical Uzbek family, and Diana to a family that apparently follows Russian or Western traditions. Generally in Uzbekistan, when a young man reaches marriageable age his family begins to look for a future wife for him. Usually, young people marry within specific social groups, and marriages are arranged between families. Often times, a boy and a girl are sent on a date to meet each other so they can express their opinion later. If everything satisfies both families, parents of the groom send matchmakers to the bride's house. Nowadays the situation when young people choose their marriage partners is common, though the custom of arranged matrimonial alliances where parents make the choices lives on not only in rural areas of the country but in the capital as well. *Superbride*

also reflects the typical customs tied to the arranged marriage traditions. Thus, Munira-opa has already found a proper wife for her son –daughter of their neighbors Gulchehra– and uses Sardor's only date with her as an argument for marriage. Sardor goes against the family's decision and chooses Diana, but under the pressure of traditional thinking, his parents do not want to accept a daughter-in-law of non-Uzbek ethnicity.

In the center of the narrative lies a conflict between the modern bride or *kelin* (daughter-in-law in Uzbek) and her conservative mother-in-law. Since the daughter-in-law occupies the lowest position in the husband's family, treating the daughter-in-law as a free worker or slave is one of the most pressing problems in Uzbek society. The aggression of mothers-in-law towards daughter-in-law is not only one of the main reasons for quarrels, divorces, and even suicides in real life, but one of the most frequently exploited themes in the local cinema. However, in *Superbride*, the conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is shown from a humorous side; although Sardor's mother constantly comes up with more and more new tasks for Diana, the girl manages to cleverly get out of tricky situations. In many ways, it happens with a help of technical devices –a laptop and the Internet– which makes comedy truly up-to-date. Many jokes in *Superbride* are built around the Internet, which Diana uses frequently; it emphasizes Diana's modern upbringing – the girl studies Uzbek traditions online and searches for national food recipes on culinary websites. At the beginning of the film, Diana performs “Kelin Salom” – the wedding rite, which literal translation is “bride's greeting”. During the ceremony parents of both sides, all relatives, friends, and closest neighbors gather outside, while the bride in national costume welcomes them performing low bows from the waist. Guests in their turn greet a newlywed with wishes, presents, and blessings. When Munira-opa asks how she has learned “Kelin Salom”, Diana answers, “Have read on the Internet”. Later Diana surprises her mother-in-law again with the ability to light the fire in the traditional Uzbek clay oven. “Where did you learn it?” questions mother-in-law, “On the Internet”, the girl answers again.

Besides modern humor, the film is also replete with a humor inherent to romantic comedies that “has less to do with slapstick or the grotesque and more to do with absurd situations, verbal sparring, and improbable couplings”⁷. The genre “generates its humor from conventional gender roles as they are expressed in men's and women's mistaken expectations of each other”⁸. So is in *Superbride* when Sardor jokingly proposes to Diana, and the girl suddenly agrees. However, she immediately asks, “Are you scared?”, while on his part, Sardor looks confused and embarrassed. No less funny are the verbal arguments between the older generation couples when their expectations for each other do not match.

Snappy conversations, modern gags, as well as the gap between the generations that prevents the understanding of youth pranks and fills individual scenes with a special comicality, helped in making *Superbride* a box-office sensation in 2008.

Uzbek daughter-in-law in frames of a patriarchal gaze

Despite the huge success among local viewers, *Superbride* is well-suited to be considered as an object of feminist critics for the hidden idea of humiliating a woman. The unwanted marriage creates tensions between Diana and her mother-in-law, who is deeply

dissatisfied with the interracial union and dreams of a “proper” Uzbek wife for her son. Considering Sardor's choice as a great shame, Munira-opa decides to make Diana leave by way of becoming a “venomous mother-in-law”. She shifts the entire house holding on Diana's shoulders as it is customary in Central Asian families. Treating daughter-in-law as a free workforce is rooted in age-old norms, according to which the newly bride should not only help mother-in-law but also babysit younger members of the family, cook, clean, wash, take care of domestic animals, meet the guests, and generally obey all the orders of senior family members. In such circumstances, *kelin* who bears the brunt of caregiving and chores does not have time for her self-development, education, and health. *Superbride* demonstrates that Diana has faced similar strict norms and pressure after entering Sardor's family as a daughter-in-law. The story of Diana and her mother-in-law raises questions about gender relations in contemporary Uzbek families, which despite modernized lifestyles are still based on male supremacy. Most female characters are shown in a domestic setting fulfilling their “female” duties as caregivers, while men spend time relaxing, playing bowling, or meeting friends. *Superbride* as many other Uzbek films accepts the image of a 'domesticated' woman as an ideal while the plot based on traditionalistic views on female purpose subtly transmits the idea of humiliating a woman especially when it comes to young married women. On top of that, Sardor's mother, despite being a woman herself, is a vivid example of a *social patriarchal mentality* towards the place of women in the family structure; going through oppression within the family, these women expect the same from their daughters and daughters-in-law unwilling to break the vicious circle of women's discrimination. Hanging all housework on Diana, Munira-opa reminds Sardor's father how his mother forced her to do the same.

Diana seems resisting assumptions about male domination but still turns into a victim of gender inequality at home or outside of it. Although the relationship between spouses is built not on single-sex supremacy but more on a peer friendship, Diana fully depends on Sardor's opinion and his evaluation of her as a woman and wife. Sardor is ruining the typical stereotype of an Uzbek man by breaking off the arranged marriage with an Uzbek girl and marrying Diana, however, after the wedding he acts like a traditional husband. He brings Diana flowers everyday but does not help around the house and insists on having a baby as soon as possible. “She will sweep my yard,” boasts the young man to his friend when he meets Diana for the first time. *Sweep my yard* is a reference to the bounden duty of *kelin* to sweep the courtyard in front of the house if there is one, which cannot be neglected in any case. This sharp phrase about Diana reflects not only Sardor's opinion but also a limited male perception of female potential.

The depiction of Eastern women lying in the core of *Superbride*'s narrative has a lot of common with Susan Faludi's definition of backlash – a deeply conservative media response to feminist progress claiming that women's equality was leading to their unhappiness. In the '80s, backlash shaped much of Hollywood's portrayal of women presenting typical plot narratives, where a “good mother and wife” wins over a careerist woman. According to the humiliating subtext of backlash films, an independent woman should be punished in the end, shamed or killed. These Hollywood portrayals grew up from one of the main backlash's theses – women were unhappy because they were too free. Independent and working women were painted as “selfish” or “immoral”, while the

medical prescriptions for females who resisted “nesting trends” were limited in simplicity – quit work and get married. Thus in the *Superbride*, explaining to the neighbors the reason why Diana is not at home, Munira-opa spits sarcastically, “Diana is at the university, she has to study!” Her reaction once again expresses the limiting stereotypes on a woman's role in the household – in the kitchen preparing food and cleaning the house. Diana's study is considered to be unimportant in comparison with the female's primal duty – pleasing her man. Patriarchal ideology in the film was also conveyed in the demand to get pregnant as soon as possible. As literary scholars, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe, “Just as more and more women were getting paid for using their brains, more and more men represented them in novels, plays, and poems as nothing but bodies.”⁹ *Superbride's* main lead is an example of an emancipated young woman who attends university, dresses extravagantly, drives a jeep, participates in a hip-hop dance contest, and argues with her parents. But everybody in her husband's neighborhood sees her only as an object of reproduction, making Diana suffer by the constant requirement to have a baby. In Uzbek society, if the daughter-in-law failed to get pregnant during the first year she is considered “defective” while male infertility and other possible causes are not taken into account. When the doctor informs the young couple about incompatible RH factors, Sardor blames Diana in it thereby demonstrating the climax of patriarchy – accusing a woman alone of failing to get pregnant. Earlier in the movie, the same does Sardor's father blaming Munira-opa in their son's inter-ethnic marriage.

The director does not include a religious sequence in the film, perhaps, for a variety of reasons: avoiding the imposition of religion and depiction of a binational marriage in the first place. There are just a few films that show relations between spouses of different ethnic groups but those that deal with this topic almost ignore the religious content. Usually, Uzbek movies include performing of Muslim rites as a part of daily life like praying or ablution; however, *Superbride* does not depict even that small sequence of the everyday religious part of living. Although Sardor's family represented as modern from the visual side –holding a modern wedding, playing bowling, partying with friends, and wearing non-national clothes outside of *makhallya*– it is deeply patriarchal about gender relations. There is also no single hint about whether or not Diana and her parents practice any religion. Therefore, it can be argued that Diana's oppression is almost completely based on gender inequality.

***Superbride* and postmodern femininity**

Post feminism typical for romantic comedies of the 2000s looked for a balance to bind an idea of female strength and power with femininity characterized by passivity and dependence. When Sardor asks Diana if she is satisfied with everyday sweeping and cleaning, the young woman knowingly answers, “It's okay; I am just a *kelin* in this house”. Her phrase once again reminds the viewer of the lowest status of the daughter-in-law in the husband's family, particularly until she produces the first child. Until that, fundamental decisions about a young woman's life – whether she will work or not, with whom she is allowed to communicate, and how often she can visit her natal family completely depends on her new relatives. Here Diana adopts a knowing tone inherent to the post feminist cinema, demonstrating the contemporary knowing woman's choice of

traditional lifestyle. Diana is aware of her place in the husband's family, as well as of her female duties. "But you are – Diana", tells Sardor. His phrase "*But you are Diana*" emphasizes not only the girl's non-Uzbek ethnicity but embraces her modern upbringing, sassy personality, and as a result her unfitting into the conventional family surrounding.

According to Yvonne Tasker, traces of feminism as a cultural force are reflected in a romantic comedy as "a narrative insistence that men too must change".¹⁰ *Superbride* does not fully meet post feminist film features but few attempts of smoothing male unwavering supremacy can be seen in the ending sequences. Unable to withstand the pressure from new family members Diana leaves to parents' house. Eventually, mother-in-law feels remorse, while Sardor asks Diana to return passionately confessing his love but never apologizes. Diana refuses, however, suddenly discovered girl's pregnancy plays into the hands of her husband. The girl returns home and repairs relations with the mother-in-law who warms up to her non-Uzbek *kelin*. Finally, in the best traditions of backlash movies, the protagonist transforms into an obedient Uzbek wife whose "primary responsibility consists of getting pregnant and ensuring the stability of a traditional social structure"¹¹. Such imagery is close to Diane Negra's notion of *retreatism* as a central trope of contemporary post feminist culture. According to it, "a variety of recent popular cultural narratives centralize/idealize a woman's apparently fully knowledgeable choice to retreat from public sphere interactions in favor of domesticity"¹². The final moments of the film are revealing an "idyllic picture": two men are discussing the questions of their business, while Diana and Munira-opa fight over a broomstick for an order to sweep the yard.

Superbride moves to the foreground all basic female virtues as beauty, cleanliness, kindness, obedience, and patience by propagating the desirable portrait of a good-looking female who manages to study and get her domestic work done at the same time; but what is more important – not paying attention to naggings of the husband's family. During the film, Diana is undergoing significant visual changes as well, her transformation is shown through the outfits she wears, for example, outside of her husband's house Diana shows up in shorts and modern dresses that shock the residents of *makhallya*. Changes in her personal style during the film are obvious: if in the first scene, the girl is wearing a high fashioned jumpsuit and heels, by the end she mostly appears in Uzbek traditional clothes – plain khan-atlas dress, wide trousers, and a kerchief. On the other hand, Diana and her attitude reflect the main conditions of postmodern femininity: she is knowing, having a multicultural background, well-educated and, what is strikes the most, she makes her own choice towards her future life.

The extraordinary mixture of Uzbek conservatism and up-to-date glamorous femininity reflected in *Superbride* found its continuous depiction in such popular projects as *Insane*, *Groom for Rent*, *Daddy*, *Not a Good Match*, *The Heart is Crying*, etc. However, *Superbride* more than the others is fulfilling a realistic expectation of men since traditional motives highly dominate the local screens even nowadays, and leave the woman's image in frames of patriarchal gaze.

Contemporary art cinema: return to traditionalism

After years of overwhelming Western influence, national context became one of

the prevailing topics in modern Uzbek films, since the cinema of independent Uzbekistan is an important part of national art and the main factor of the spiritual renewal of society. Filmmakers show their intentions to rediscover local identity, and skillfully draw the new portrait of Uzbek woman.

From the 2000s, along with low-quality commercial products Uzbekistan released a number of art movies that cover such topics as a rethinking of the past, local traditions, customs, daily reality, and societal problems. Directors base their characters on the mentality of Uzbek people inseparable from deep spiritual values. In the attempt to rediscover the identity of the indigenous population, film projects of “Uzbekkino” promote the image of a woman that meets the expectations of society. Female leads of these films follow the traditional and ritualistic way of life richly endowed with spiritual meaning. Cinema helps in representing the cultural ideas about the role of women and propagate characters who put husband, family, shame, and tradition above career, self-interests, and wealth, so there took place a devolution of the woman's portrayal – from an emancipated woman to a traditional one. Art movies generated the image of a silent female, sometimes an outcast, but with a highly strong presence, so the soulful and traditional woman of art cinema coexists with the image of the spoiled modern girl from commercial movies. The woman becomes an essential element of the majority of films, where the depiction of her spiritual world intersects with the reflection of diverse social issues as a whole or as a “women issue” separately (*Heaven is my Dwelling Place, Road under the Skies, Women of Heaven, etc.*). Many films address contemporary problems and present women as victims of various circumstances: wives of men working abroad (*Women of Heaven*) forced to wait for their husbands for years, women lured to Islamic groups (*The Deceived Woman*), victims of sex traffic (*Shame, Colorless Dreams*), women who are not understood or accepted by society (*Heaven is my Dwelling Place, The Yurt, etc.*).

Heaven is my Dwelling Place is telling a sad story about the young woman whose incongruous beauty makes her an object of human hostility. Her beauty was considered as a trick of a devil, so nobody wanted to marry her but to use for their dirty purposes; the protagonist tries to adapt to any situations, and yet becomes an outcast due to “evils of traditional, patriarchal community, where prejudices of ancestral society prevail”.¹³ The plot of *Road Under the Skies* revolves around two young people – Aziz and Muhabbat. While Aziz was doing military service, Muhabbat pregnant with his baby was forced to marry an adult man. In the end, the girl accepts her fate and adapts to a new life. The film conveys the idea of variability and motion of life, as well as the woman's reconciliation and humility before the circumstances. The only female lead of *The Yurt* is a mute village girl who vigorously supports her husband in his refusal to accept the modern style of life. Satisfied with the secluded way of living in the mountain yurt and household toils, she helps her gloomy spouse to find the joy of life again. On the day before her marriage, the protagonist of *The Spring* comes to an understanding that life is not that pure as it seems. Realizing that her spiritual values cannot be protected in her home town society, the bride humbly cries near the spring where according to the local tradition each girl should wash her face on the eve of the wedding. All these movies reveal how modern cinema bases its female characters on the traditional mentality, while the character's victimhood and

ability to adapt to the strikes of fate are brought to the fore.

Feministic perspectives on women's place within the patriarchal community were reflected in the scandalous documentary *Burden of Virginity*, probably the only documentary film on gender subject. In modern Uzbek movies, sex or sexual motives are strongly forbidden; romantic scenes include only innocent physical contacts while flirtatious or pathetic dialogues compensate the missing sensuality in a character's interaction. An unspoken prohibition to discuss intimate topics, and especially to display them on the screen, was one of the reasons why *Burden of Virginity* considered controversial. In the conservative Central Asian society boys are allowed to have sexual relations before marriage, but for a girl, it is a shame since being a virgin is the bride's primary duty. The documentary is based on virginity check-up tradition in Uzbekistan and draws attention to the people who have fallen victims to this ritual – as questions on sexuality and sex education remain taboo, girls and boys, as well as their parents, are cut off from the necessary information that could protect entire families from breakups. *Burden of Virginity* tells a story of a girl who was chased out from her husband's home the next morning after the wedding as the absence of virgin blood on the sheets became the reason for immediate divorce. The film demonstrates the paradox, “while in some places people can have a fully civilized wedding, very similar to a European one, and at the same time they can organize an inspection of virginity”.¹⁴

Conclusion

Although few studies have indicated a higher percentage of strong female characters on daytime television, stereotypical and traditional images of women still predominate in all media forms. Both the media and national policy statements reinforce notions of women as homemakers and attribute to women characteristics of devotion, selflessness, and tenderness. Such presentations are positive, though at the same time they portray women as “passive and are generally not compatible with images of women in leadership roles in politics, business, or even in civil society”.¹⁵ Despite numerous women's achievements in various fields, the perception of women primarily as caretakers and household keepers leads to the limitation of their opportunities in professional growth and participation in public life. Lately, Uzbek women are highly concerned about the “ideal” image that oppresses women and builds a model of behavior for youngster viewers. Mass media are continuing to maintain the sex-role stereotypes even in the face of changing reality where women are active and successful at work and define themselves not only like housewives and mothers. Unfortunately, in today's life, gender stereotypes are not eliminated, and woman's achievements are losing their meaning when everybody starts talking about women and their nature.

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