

## Western Influence in *Queen* – A Critical Study

- Ranveer

**Abstract:** Western culture with its different ingredients has greatly influenced the film *Queen*. It is visible in the title, setting, story and characters of the film. The rediscovery of Rani, the leading character of the film is not something brought about because of her brief interaction with western culture and atmosphere but as a result of her evolved inner strength. Other characters are variously affected by this western influence. Contradicting the popular belief concerning liberating influence of western culture, most of these characters remain shackled in their narrow prejudices despite remaining in touch with it (western culture) for long.

**Keywords:** Western influence, Culture, Rediscovery, Interaction, Intervention, Inner strength.

Considering the success and wide critical acclaim received by the movie 'Queen' it is beyond doubt that director Vikas Bahl must have put a considerable thought and research into its making. There have been a number of movies, which could become successful because of a foreign and exotic setting in addition to other vital ingredients warranting this success. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ), *Aa Ab Laut Chalein*, *Pardesh*, *Love Aaj Kal* and *English Vinglish* are some of the names that prove the point. The filmmaker must have been enamored with adding the element of foreignness and exotica keeping in mind the earlier trend.

John Desmond Bernal, famous scientist and writer observes in his essay *The World, the Flesh & the Devil* (1929): "the present aristocracy of western culture, at the moment when it most clearly dominates the world, is being imitated rapidly and successfully in every eastern country". As far as this film is concerned this imitation is evident in more than one ways – from the selection of the title to the setting of the film and from story to selection of characters. The demand of the story of this movie made it easier for the director to find a suitable foreign location for the planned honeymoon of the planned marriage. We just cannot question the choice of Paris and Amsterdam, the two hottest destinations for honeymoon goes who can afford. We cannot even blame the director for not choosing any other beautiful location in India as Vijay, the would-be-groom, a London return must have a lot to spend. Our (Indians') mindset and colonial attitude of attributing all the charm, goodness and wonder with everything foreign, particularly the West, must have also been taken care of by the director. Then the story, having hardly any elements of the so-called formula of masala movies, required to have something of the exotica and foreignness to compensate. The choice of

the title, the translated 'Queen' and not 'Rani', the actual name of the heroine, suggests another preoccupation with anything western (language and culture). The director can be exonerated here on two grounds. First, he must have in mind the prospective international audience, who can better associate with 'Queen' than 'Rani'. Second, 'Rani' indicates the common household name for Indian girls, particularly in the North Indian villages, where they are hardly offered anything grand and glamorous, other than the mere name and the traditional mothers' wish that their daughters will eventually rule at their in-laws as a real Rani which, unfortunately, in most of the cases proves to be a reality far more oppressive and stifling than it was at her parents'.

Going by the popular criticism in various media, analysts and critics have uniformly claimed the film to be the success story of the rediscovery of a naive Indian girl living in modern middle class environs of Rajouri in West Delhi. In this sense, the movie becomes a Bildungsroman, brought about by the interaction between traditional, ignorant and naïveté represented by Rani and multicultural cosmopolitan liberal and intelligent culture represented by a group of characters who come in contact with Rani on her sojourn. However, there is enough evidence in the form of character traits and dialogues which substantiates the contrary claim that the so called rediscovery of her (Rani's) independent identity is brought about as a result of the internal strength of her character. It is this characteristic moral strength of her character that ultimately leads her to come out of shackles imposed by the restrictive, orthodox and patriarchal culture rather than the above mentioned cosmopolitan cultural intervention.

In the beginning, Rani looks like a common suburban middle class naive girl, who feels proud at having obeyed rules laid down by the conventional patriarchal culture and being always instructed at home by the parents, at school by teachers and in society by her friends. In the light of this argument when we come to know through Sonal, her friend that she has maintained her virginity, we tend to assume readily that she must have lived a highly conventional and moral life, which makes her to keep her virginity intact as a most prized possession of a maiden girl in Indian society. However, as the subsequent scenes of the movie prove it was her volition than force, self-built sense of propriety than imposition, strength of character than weakness, which leads her on the path of such austerity. This strength of character is also shown when she does not make much fuss and go melodramatic as a result of being rejected for marriage by her fiancé Vijay only two days before the event. She is resilient enough to emerge out of this shock. After moping for a brief period, she comes out of her room and resolves not to be bogged down by this shock. She relies on her inner strength and resolves to fulfill her long cherished dream by going solo on her honeymoon. She is ready to embark on a lonely journey, full of struggle against the stereotypically

prejudiced world. Ralph Waldo Emerson has very pertinently said: "The individual has always had struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself." She is confused and heartbroken not because she has been rejected in love by Vijay but firstly out of her concern for the possible misery, her parents were to suffer in the form of financial loss and ensuing social stigma and secondly at the prospect of a doomed honeymoon. Very soon, she comes out of her mourning, taking something to eat on her own and recalling in a series of images how she was excited about this honeymoon and got her bank account closed to collect money for the tickets. Later on in a similar image we come across how she used to save all the money, she could get including even the small amount, won by her while playing card games with her family. There is hardly anything, which shows that she was in love with Vijay. It was an arranged match, a mere societal obligation to be fulfilled; and it seems, for her Vijay was only a means to an end. The end, to come in contact with the outside and foreign world. The decision to go alone on her honeymoon itself shows how strong and unorthodox she is in her outlook.

Further she demonstrates her sense of integrity and internal strength when she is selectively impressed by the character of Vijaylaxmi in Paris. She goes in her company for shopping and sightseeing and respects her as a friendly, compassionate and helpful human being but she is critical of her ultramodern lifestyle, sense of dressing, habit of too much drinking and having too much sex even with strangers. That is why, she advises her not to overindulge in these habits. At Amsterdam, she maintains her identity and moral instinct when she is appalled at the prospect of having to share a room with three other male occupants from different nationalities. She prefers to sleep outside until she is not fully sure about their integrity and probity. Subsequently she befriends them, goes with them for shopping, sightseeing and a cooking competition but remains consistent with her strong moral fiber. Despite going with them to the red light area, where Rukhsaar (Roxette) works as a poll dancer and prostitute, to hand over a parcel, sent for her (Rukhsaar) by her parents through Vijaylaxmi, Rani is not tempted to appreciate what Rukhsaar does to sustain her large family back in India. In the western setting represented by Paris and Amsterdam, the two most fashionable and glamorous cities of the world, it is almost impossible for women to remain oblivious to their image and looks. America Ferrera, the famous American actress quoted in *The Telegraph* news article rightly observes: "It would be impossible to be a woman in western culture and not have your own issues about your image and what you look like." Rani proves to be an exception in this setting. She not only exemplifies her characteristic simplicity by donning simple salwar-suits but also remains rather oblivious of adorning her looks in any perceptible manner. This

simplicity is further symbolized in her improvised dance sequence on a Bollywood song vis-à-vis the original striptease. Here as an alternative, she presents her own Indian style of dancing rather than falling for the striptease.

It is remarkable that out of the five characters Rani met during her journey she could relate to her three male friends of different nationalities better than the two females, one half Indian the other a Pakistani. Traditionally in India, because of socialization, females are better equipped and comfortable to express themselves in female company rather than the males'. Rani is different, as she could very well trust her male friends after some initial hiccups emanating from a sense of superficial morality. Once she breaks through this façade of morality, she lives her true nature and soothes their troubled souls more than once by hugging them. Here she has almost nothing to disapprove in their behavior as she had in the two female characters. Here we come across the true potential of her capability to love. Here we understand the real nature of her love. Her love is sincere, deep, boundless and unconventional considering the set prescribed limits applied to it in Indian context. It cannot be defined and categorized in the traditional moralistic framework of love, which validates love only if it is between a married man and woman. She could never come to the point of loving like this in case of her relationship with Vijay.

We cannot say that this was a sudden revelation and a total makeover her personality, occurred within a short span of time (5 days) because of her interaction with foreign atmosphere and culture. This was her well-established inherent nature, waiting for a little stimulus to come to its own. She could relate easily with them as she finds them like herself oppressed and distressed but not defeated. Taka, the Japanese orphan, has lost his mother and father as the result of a disastrous Tsunami. Oleksander, an artist is distressed over the fact that people were killed in the war for oil. Tim, the French is a poor struggling musician who plays and sings to collect money to fend off his expenses. All four are distressed and troubled souls; hence, they get on very well and complement each other. Rani is not ready to sacrifice this newly gained love even when she suddenly encounters repentant Vijay, ready to accept her in her new avatar. It is nothing less than a shock for Vijay to hear from Rani that she is not going to miss the rock show that she is to attend with her newly found friends despite being warned against such weird foreigners (as he calls them) by him. She cannot be persuaded to go with Vijay at any cost. Once she has delved deep down her inner self to find her true independent spirit she can no longer be deluded by Vijay's theatrics. Now she no longer requires any outside help, when she can get it within herself. Now she can manage things on her own rather than being managed by the likes of Vijay. Since she has tasted the fruits of her newly found independence in being her true self in her relation with her friends,

she no longer aspires anything which can be gained as a result of her marriage with Vijay. She can no longer be persuaded by Vijay to become someone of his choice. Ralph Waldo Emerson has very rightly said in one of his inspiring essays: "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." With the help of her newly found confidence, she handles the situation well and avoids a possible scuffle between Vijay and her friends.

At the end when Rani returns to India, she is presented as a totally changed personality. Having recovered fully from her misery, exuberant and bubbling with confidence she goes to Vijay's house alone to return the engagement ring. Considering the commercial constraints in mind, it is easy to understand why the makers of the film could not resist the temptation to incorporate this dramatically important and climactic scene. It was probably to give some sense of closure to this all-important journey of her development, otherwise she could have easily done it through the benign offices of her parents without paying Dhingras back in their own coin. Let us further examine if this sudden makeover in Rani's personality was the result of a brief sojourn to the western space of Paris and Amsterdam or was it only a final finish given to an already formed, strong, established albeit a little amorphous personality.

If this western influence was so potent, how could it not bring any perceptible change in the behavior and personality of certain other characters in the film who remained vulnerable to such influence for comparatively far longer time than it was in case with Rani. First, take the case of Vijay, who is said to have been in London for a long time to get higher education. Has he ever been touched in the least possible manner by the so-called liberal and progressive society of west? He looks no different than any other common, ambitious chauvinistic, prudish, narrow minded, condescending and over possessive youth in his attitude towards his would be wife. He does not allow Rani to dance even in a family gathering. The idea of his prospective wife, becoming a working woman is not his cup of tea. His impatience with her efforts to learn driving, drinking champagne, befriending other males is the other evidence which amply proves the fact that he could gain nothing perceptible and positive out of his contact with the western civilization.

Verma's settled in Paris are other such examples to be mentioned here. The old lady with her daughter-in-law, Rani's only distant relatives in Paris, whom she visits as per her parents instructions behave in a typical, snobbish, condescending and hypocritical manner when they make an artificial fuss over the sad fate of Rani in bearing the stigma of a cancelled marriage. They could not even afford to be as magnanimous as to give Rani just hundred Euros in the form of *shagun* despite uttering bombastic words of care and concern for Rani, though they could not even recall her name. The characters of Vijaylaxmi and Rukhsaar in the light of what Gloria E. Anzaldúa, a famous American scholar and critic,

said: "In trying to become 'objective', western culture made 'objects' of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby loosing 'touch' with them." (Quoted in Gilb, 2006, p. 260). First comes, the character of Vijaylaxmi, who seems to be well versed in French language and culture. On her, the western culture could leave a mixed impression. Good, as far as her modern attitude and independent outlook is concerned and bad, as far as her delinquent habits of too much drinking and having too much sex even with strangers. She helped Rani because of her natural helping attitude and Rani being an Indian.

Rukhsaar was affected by the foreign culture only to the extent of availing the dubious means of earning her livelihood. She looked helpless when she told Rani that she could find nothing else as work to sustain her family than becoming a pole dancer and prostitute. The pretext of not finding anything else to do seems implausible considering the well-developed economy of the country and city (Holland and Amsterdam) in which she was living. So, different characters who come under western influence – some for years and some for just days – are differently influenced by western culture. More than the outside influence of a foreign culture the personal make, the DNA plays a vital role in ensuring long lasting happiness for the concerned characters. Vijay, Rukhsaar, Vijaylaxmi and Verma to some extent remain unsatisfied, directionless and unhappy whereas Rani emerges as a rejuvenated and happy soul, content with whatever she could achieve (not insignificant at all) as a result of regaining her true self. Thomas Louis, a noted American psychiatrist, has rightly observed in his book *A General Theory of Love*. "One brain's blueprint may promote joy more readily than most; in another, pessimism reigns. Whether happiness infuses or eludes a person depends, in part, on the DNA he has chanced to receive. (152)"

In contrast, let us now consider the example of Indians in this context. Rani's grandmother wins the case, as she is far more liberal and indulgent in her approach towards Rani than her parents. She consoles Rani, and motivates her to come out of her state of shock at the cancellation of her marriage by citing her own example of having a broken love affair and later on finding Rani's grandfather to marry. She even suggests her to enjoy rather than watch television at Paris. Rani's parents though crestfallen at the tragedy befallen their daughter, are liberal enough to allow her to go on her honeymoon alone, the mother is a little worried regarding Rani's foreign stay. Her father and brother Chintu, are rather foolishly enamored to Vijaylaxmi, who is seen on Skype chat, in a semi nude state.

Rani keeps her virginity intact not because of any kind of strictures and prohibitions imposed by her family. Rather it is the result of her cultivated sense of propriety, a staple element of her own sense of a strong female character. This sense of propriety is not compromised when she courageously kisses the Italian restaurant owner, after being

provoked by him to prove that Indians are no less perfect in lip to lip kissing than they are in cooking good food. After this adventurous act, she adds a caveat by suggesting that it was only for the sake of Indian prestige and not for deriving any sensual pleasure. She could not afford to willingly compromise, her sense of long cherished propriety because of her brief contact with the so-called free and licentious western culture. She emerges as a strong and independent character, who could rely on her own ethical resources to bear herself well while being surrounded by strangers in a foreign culture.

At last, in the light of above mentioned arguments we do not find much substance in the claim that 'Queen' is a story of sudden rediscovery of Rani's true identity because of her short journey to west. It is not even the story of a total makeover of Rani's personality as the result of a positive intervention of the so-called liberal and progressive western culture, in her life. It is the story of an already well-formed character having a strong sense of her socio-cultural and familial dispositions that took shape as a result of her internal nature and process of socialization, which remained subdued and silent till she meets likeminded people representing essential and universal human traits. It proves the point that the essential human nature is same everywhere. People behave as per their internal and inherent nature. They are affected differently by the same set of environs. The claim that western culture is far progressive and it is far more volatile and influential has its limitations and shortcomings. We need to reconsider our perception that a foreign and exotic culture is itself a panacea for all our ills and that our own culture is fraught with danger of regression and degeneration.

### References :

- Bernal, Johan Desmond. (2010). *The World, the Flesh & the Devil: An Enquiry into the Future of the Three Enemies of the Rational Soul*. Available from <http://forum.prisonplanet.com/index.php?topic=195218.0>
- Essential Life Lessons from Ralph Waldo Emerson. (n.d.) [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://www.lifeoptimizer.org/2010/01/15/essential-life-lessons-from-ralph-waldo-emerson/>
- Gilb, Dagoberto. (2006). *Hecho en Tejas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Lewis, Thomas., Amini, Fari., & Lannon, Richard (2001). *A General Theory of Love*. New York: Random House.
- Mountainpat. (2003, October 9). The privilege of Owning Yourself [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://discoveringwisdom.com/2013/10/09/the-privilege-of-owning-yourself/>
- Vikas, Bahl, Dir. *Queen* (DVD), 2014, Mumbai: Shemaroo DVD.
- Whitworth, Melissa. (2011, November 6). America Ferrara Heads to Chicago. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre-features/8870271/america-ferrara-heads-to-chicago.html>

