



Women in the Corporate Workspace: An Analysis of the Principal Characters of *Bombay Begums*

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Abstract

India today exists in a complex transitional state, functioning amidst a globalized world, but still not liberated from the sexism and patriarchy embedded within its culture. These regressive ideas and the chauvinism, harassment and discrimination they produce have seeped into every aspect and corner of Indian society, and manifest with especial toxicity in the workplace. The corporate world, often imagined as a progressive haven where women can be recognized for their merits and attain self-sufficiency, is in fact plagued by a host of problematic practices and systems, which privilege men in both power and employment and render women vulnerable in the very spaces where they ought to enjoy the highest agency. The 2021 Netflix series *Bombay Begums* boldly explores many of these issues, shining a light into secretive cubicles and high-placed boardrooms, and depicting the travails of the women who navigate them in the hopes of achieving fulfilment and success. This paper intends to highlight, address and expand upon the points raised by the show regarding the barriers and challenges faced by women in the workspace, drawing on statistics and surveys regarding working women today to draw a line between the themes of the show and corporate India's greater sociocultural realities.

Keywords: Women, Workplace, Economics, Corporate, Sexual Harassment, Feminism, Popular Culture, Mumbai

Introduction

To be a woman in India is to fight against a current, formed of unrelenting sexism, discrimination and exploitation, constantly striving to sweep women off-balance and threaten their stability. Though difficult

enough in domestic roles approved by society, the task of achieving one's goals and finding fulfilment becomes even harder if a woman was to swim against the stream, and strive for a higher status in life. To do so is to seek power— a power concentrated in the hands of men and the patriarchy, well-defended over millennia, behind gates that shall not spring open easily. And even if a woman were to slip past the gap, to edge ahead in the rat-race and make it into the upper echelons, the gates slam shut behind her, and strand her in foreign territory, still dominated by privileged men who are eager to prey upon the outsider. There is no space in Indian society where a woman could transcend the touch of stereotypes, the male gaze or the yoke of sexism. And yet, despite these obstacles, women still strive for advancement, eternally seeking that elusive place where independence and happiness lie. Directed by Alankrita Srivastava, the 2021 Netflix series *Bombay Begums* is a story about four such women, and the obstacles they face on the path to achievement.

A common thread that ties together the four principal adult women in the show is their desire for advancement—Rani, as the CEO of the Royal Bank, looks to stay in power, improve profits and advance new policies; Fatima, her subordinate, is happy to be promoted and have her talents recognized, though it breeds issues in her family life; Ayesha, a small-town girl who's migrated to Mumbai, wishes to move up the ladder, attain economic independence, and live a better, happier life, and Lily, a bar dancer turned sex worker, wants to transcend the disrepute of her profession and find a 'respectable' job that can provide for her son. While there exists a complex matrix of relationships, norms and ideas they must navigate, the nature of their journeys and experiences are shaped by the environments they operate in -- in this case,

various sectors of Mumbai, India's commercial hub, a city defined by high costs and economic inequality. It is primarily the workplace that provides women with the chance to earn an income of their own and attain self-sufficiency, but those very workplaces can also prove merciless and exploitative, filled with obstacles that impede or destroy a woman's upward movement. In this article, an attempt has been made to explore some of these barriers as depicted in *Bombay Begums*, the way they reflect India's social realities, and how they might be overcome.

Lonely and Desperate at the Top: The Case of Rani

Despite common talk of progress, the Female Labour Force Participation Rate in India is abysmal, and has actually fallen over the years, going from 30.27% in 1990 to 20.8% in 2019 (Financial Express). Additionally, the percentage of female CEOs and MDs in India's NSE-listed companies is a low 3.69% in 2019, nearly stagnant from 3.2% in 2014 (Verma and Basu). This paints a depressing picture of the dearth of opportunities provided to Indian women, driving in the sheer rarity of any women who attain high-level success. Corporate environments are very much a 'boy's club', and the higher women manage to reach, the more resistance they encounter, both in terms of reaching higher and in holding on to their present positions. This is reflected in *Bombay Begums* with Rani, often seen in board meetings as the sole woman facing down a cynical group of men, who frequently question her capabilities, threaten her position and use everything from her personal life to her advancing years as ammunition in condescending salvos.

While Rani is certainly the show's most privileged character, occupying a spot at the top of the ladder that

every principal character is striving to climb, she must bear a dual burden- first, the responsibility of her position, which exists within a web of corruption, personal dynamics, manipulation and corporate politics, and second, the stress in her family, which begins to split apart due to the lack of time she invests in it, instead prioritizing the demands of her job. Rani attempts to separate these two realms, to deal with each problem on its own footing, but the corporate world she inhabits and the personal space she shuns are both closely intertwined, with major developments in each affecting the other. A common manifestation of her central issue comes in the form of Rani's menopause -- she frequently suffers hot flushes and exhaustion, but in the shark-infested seas of high-level management, there is no space for showing weakness. She frequently dodges the issue when pressed, and is terrified when one of her subordinates discovers the truth and hints that she might be growing physically unfit to exercise good judgment. In a fair world, this issue would be treated with sensitivity by her co-workers and supported by various concessions, but that is hardly the case- even at the peak of the mountain, notions about the biological limitations of Rani's gender threaten to drag her down.

By rising to the top of a system that is exploitative and corrupt, Rani herself must participate in this corruption to stay afloat- she often dispenses personal favors, is not averse to bribing Lily to prevent a scandal, and nearly browbeats Ayesha into dropping her charges of sexual harassment against her molester, despite the fact that she herself has suffered the same ordeal before. Although she listens to her conscience and supports Ayesha in the final episode, Deepak, the man who molested Ayesha and also served as Rani's high-ranking subordinate, informs the police about the bribes she gave Lily in the finale. Through

this development, *Bombay Begums* drives in a bitter message- that it is not enough for a handful of women to succeed, because the corporate system itself is immensely flawed, toxic and exploitative. Those that are heartless advance, and those that display empathy open themselves up for betrayal, because a single victory cannot alter the nature of the warfare waged in boardrooms and cubicles- a no-holds-barred, materialistic maelstrom of secrets and lies that exploits everything, including institutionalized sexism, to concentrate power in the hands of a few.

Shackled by Ideals of Femininity: The Case of Fatima

Fatima, unlike Rani, has the opportunity to leave the system earlier on -- she has a well-earning husband, a cushy life and an active social circle, with the only issue being her inability to conceive a child. Fatima clearly regrets and wishes to amend this, often denigrating herself as useless for her 'failure' in producing children, even though she's immensely successful and talented. This demonstrates the high degree to which traditional notions of femininity can cling to women, no matter how high their social status, and resolving her infertility through means ranging from IVF to surrogacy is a priority for Fatima. However, when Rani offers her a tempting promotion, she is conflicted, because it would mean both surpassing her husband's position and going against their initial plans, in which she would stay home to tend to the baby. The dilemma between the happiness of one's family and career interests is one that many Indian women face- Radhakrishnan, in her survey of women in the IT industry, finds that many women hesitate to call themselves 'ambitious', and consider a career to be something secondary to their domestic responsibilities to the family. At some point, one of these is expected to eclipse the other,

and the women who prioritize their careers are seen as aggressive, with connotations of having given up something or neglected their familial prospects or duties to secure professional success. (Radhakrishnan 211)

Fatima herself is torn on this -- her husband, Arijay, has no real basis for wanting her to give up on her career besides the idea that she is a woman, and women post-childbirth are expected to stay back at home and nurture the children while the husband continues to earn. On the other hand, Fatima's friends and Rani herself encourage her to focus on her professional advancement, with one of her friends declaring, 'If your marriage can't withstand your success, then it's not worthwhile'. Fatima ultimately decides not to sacrifice her career and pride, and takes the job despite many protests by her husband, reflecting that it is not solely her responsibility to raise the child, and her spouse ought to support her and make adjustments as befitting his lower position in the corporate hierarchy rather than robbing Fatima of the chance to rise higher. In this regard, she bucks the trend wherein 50% of women drop out of the corporate employment pipeline between junior and mid-levels (Malhotra), but still has a hard path ahead of her, suffering discord, disaffection and stagnation on the personal front, and manipulation by both superiors like Rani and mentors like Deepak on the professional front.

Radhakrishnan (2009) in her study on women working in the IT sector and their balance between the interests of work and family states:

The sacred construct of the Indian family, however, lies at the center of the cultural legitimacy of IT women. Their high cultural status is based on the presumption that ultimately, these women will prioritize their families over their careers. Through a

discourse of balance, restraint, and “knowing the limit,” IT women embody the “right amount” of freedom, distinguishing themselves both from the promiscuous West, as well as from other Indian women of previous generations and of different class positions. They enact idealized femininities that conform to these norms in the workplace, providing a snapshot of cultural difference for all the world to see. By upholding the Indian family as a “core value” of a global Indian identity, then, these women actively constitute a new Indian nation that rests on the mutually constituted categories of gender and class. (Radhakrishnan 210)

Fatima, as a professional in a lucrative, globalized workspace, is similar to these women, but actively abandons the archetype through her decision to prioritize her career. Conversely, her marriage collapses, she suffers another miscarriage, and even engages in repeated infidelity with an American man, behaving as the polar opposite of the ‘respectable’ Indian woman. Even so, her rebellious hedonism is not framed as an escape, but as a coping mechanism for the loss of the domestic stability she might have otherwise found. Unable to perform an idealized, ‘Indian’ form of submissive femininity as well as a promiscuous, Western model of free pleasure, she finds herself drifting and depressed, with no one left to support or love her and no place left to go. In this sense, Fatima is a victim of the extremely unrealistic standards, expectations and limitations imposed on corporate-working women with families, and in the absence of a flexible, egalitarian relationship or space where she can air out her issues. She only ends up bottling up her emotions, keeping secrets, and making bad decisions. This culminates in Fatima weeping alone in her room, abandoned by

everyone, wondering how her ideal life could unravel to this extent. She too, like all the principal characters in the show, is a victim of the pressures placed on women by the corporate world.

Amidst Suffocating Webs of Harassment: The Case of Ayesha

Next comes Ayesha, a newcomer to the bustling city of Mumbai who is striving to break free of the domination imposed upon her by her parents, and looks upon the corporate space as her means of attaining independence, charmed by its sheen of merit, openness and utilitarianism. In physically escaping from a conservative region to one she perceives as more egalitarian, Ayesha's quest for ascension is clear in its trajectory, but complicated by the dense web of office politics that she flies into, leaving her with no one to trust. While Rani and Fatima are successful, well-established women with merits and achievements to their names, Ayesha is a virtual nobody -- even her degree is from an obscure, average university, and she displays no brilliance at her profession. The only characteristic that distinguishes her in any way is her youth and her gender, but these are not necessarily merits -- her status as a young woman in the big city renders her vulnerable to an immense range of disadvantages. Stereotyped as promiscuous and manipulative, despised for perceived attempts to exploit her gender for advancement, and treated with contempt by superiors of both genders, her own sex becomes the object of much oppression and suffering.

This comes to a head when Ayesha is sexually harassed by Deepak, a high-placed employee in the company who Ayesha had previously respected, wishing to work under him rather than toiling on the assignment Rani had given her. While talking to her in the party that

immediately precedes the act, Deepak remarks that Ayesha is bold to be requesting a shift in departments, especially as she had already been fired earlier by Fatima, and only retained and reassigned on Rani's wishes. This demonstrates that he's well-aware of her ambitions, but also of the power he has over her, and implicitly assumes that she will trade sexual favors for a chance to be given more freedom and opportunities in the workplace. Deepak is later stated to have molested and traumatized many women before, none of whom were able or willing to speak out or seek justice, and the dispassionate, direct way in which he molests Ayesha demonstrates just how confident this man is in his freedom to exploit women, because he occupies a privileged position in a patriarchal work culture that normalizes sexism, framing women as effective objects that have no power to repel the advances of men if they wish to retain their career prospects. When Ayesha finally comes out with the truth and accuses Deepak, she is told that such atrocities are part-and-parcel of office culture, particularly if one hopes to be promoted or favoured, driving in the depressing reality than any attempt on a woman's part to increase her economic independence must necessarily come with a concession of personal independence and physical boundaries to the men who hold the keys to economic and social power.

Sexual harassment is one of the worst issues plaguing women in the workplace, and also one that is dangerously underreported and unaddressed. Pervasive as the issue might be, the lack of openness and opportunities to properly address it often end up giving predatory men effective immunity in the workspace, since they can use their influence to sabotage a woman's reputation and career. Working women are painfully aware of this possibility— a 2017 survey found that 70% of them do not

report sexual harassment because they fear repercussions (Chachra). Considering the difficulty of finding a well-paying job, particularly for women, simply leaving an exploitative company and finding another is scarcely an option, trapping them in chambers of intensifying trauma. The 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act was enacted to address this issue, but many have reported that no ground-level improvements have occurred, as the mandatory Internal Committees constituted by offices to deal with these issues have often proved ineffective, noncooperative or hostile, on top of a generalized pressure imposed on women by coworkers, who ask them to simply deal with the issue and not complain, as well as the threat of a defamation suit or gag order as the ultimate means of stifling women's voices. (Marathe)

Ayesha's ordeal in *Bombay Begums* reflects this depressing labyrinth of systemic failures, problematic ideologies, and exploitative structures, displaying just how apathetic the corporate workspace is towards human rights issues. Scandals, cases and controversy are unprofitable, and in these scenarios, the dignity of employees lower on the ladder is sacrificed to accommodate the craven desires of valuable workers. Ayesha's protests, delivered at the zenith of her trauma, are not treated with the sensitivity and patience she deserves, but with intimidation, scepticism and annoyance by not just the men of the company, but also by the women who chair the committee addressing her complaint. It is clear that although there exist many women who have undergone such mistreatment, they have come to accept it as an ubiquitous part of life in the workspace -- not because of any great resilience on their part, but because it is the only way in which they can justify their sufferings, framing them as an

everyday occurrence rather than a traumatic event. By doing so, they can avoid conflict, job insecurities and reprisal, but the construction of such a narrative is hardly a healthy way to deal with trauma so much as a means that preserves the surface stability of the company at the cost of women's rights, and makes it both easier for men to harass women and harder for women to speak up in any capacity.

A 2018 survey on attitudes towards sexual harassment in the workplace found that 40% of women did not consider sexual harassment a crime, and perceived it only as a misconduct or misdemeanour, reflecting issues within the understanding and perception, as caused by a lack of awareness and a general unwillingness to properly discuss and educate employees in general and women in particular about the nature of the act. As regards how women would go about attempting redressal of sexual harassment, 36.5% stated that they would consult the HR Committee or Grievance Cell, 8.30% said they would approach superior officers for advice, and only 1.00% said they would go directly to the police. In this, one observes a general distrust for official/legal modes of complaints, as well as a trust in the internal mechanisms and the judgment of senior employees, showing how women hesitate to pursue justice directly, and would rather opt for discreet, company-confined ways of resolving the issue (Sangwan and Thakre 36). However, if one takes into account the previously-mentioned ineffectiveness of these committees and the toxic office culture of reticence and suppression, then the odds of the victims of harassment receiving due recourse seem grim indeed.

Ayesha's suffering thus portrays what thousands of working Indian women have to go through, and is very clearly a systemic issue and not merely a gendered one- the fact that Rani and Fatima, fellow women, the former of

whom was even once sexually harassed herself, are unwilling to support Ayesha's case until the end reflects how the corporate workspace with its values of profit over dignity alienates individuals from each other. In order to attain their success, Rani and Fatima had to operate as selfishly and manipulatively as any of the men in the show, and are not willing to endanger their careers or hurt the company by involving a major employee in a scandal, even if it means potentially harming a vulnerable young woman, even if they themselves might've been in a position similar to her years ago. Even Lily, though kinder than the former two, abandons her insistence that Ayesha expose the truth once she runs into personal issues and finds it more beneficial to avoid stirring up a controversy— despite her fundamental empathy, she is driven to place her own interests first in a world where success is offered in limited seats. Ayesha is also faced with victim-blaming and slut-shaming, accused of creating rumors for her own benefit, and the fact that every single consideration, ranging from the status of the company to possible ulterior motives, are put before the simple clarity of Ayesha's testimony is a testament to the brutality of the system. Though she finally finds justice, the shadow of Deepak's many former victims still looms, and it is clear that he is merely the symptom of a far larger disease, the healing of which would require a drastic purging of patriarchal corporate culture.

An Entrepreneur Struggling for Independence: The Case of Lily

Lastly, there is Lily, a former bar dancer who has been forced to indulge in sex work, operating in the lowest, seediest rungs of Mumbai, far from the cleanliness of air-conditioned boardrooms and idyllic apartments, though a twist of fate gives her a far better shot at that relatively

stable, civilized world than she ever thought possible before. The crux of Lily's ambition is not merely money—at first, she is naïve enough to think that a massive influx of cash could wash away all her issues, but soon finds that even bribes cannot elevate her beyond a certain point, and are unable to entirely obscure the disdain society attaches to her profession. She is nostalgic for her past, anxious for a chance to be respected and loved, to do more than just barely survive, and from therein comes her frequent refrain of *izzat*—a word often translated as 'respect', but better understood as 'dignity', because it is proffered not just by scattered individuals, but bestowed upon a few by society as a whole, gilding them with legitimacy. Without the social capital associated with a 'respectable' profession, she cannot hope to escape her past, enrol her child in a prestigious school, or even view herself with any degree of comfort and respect.

By blackmailing Rani after her stepson injures her child in an accident, Lily is able to utilize her street-smarts to secure a good deal, impelling Rani to undertake the Shakti Welfare Scheme for Empowering Women, an initiative launched by the Royal Bank to help lower-class women establish their own businesses, factories and industries, attaining economic independence. Lily is the first beneficiary of this scheme, and actively insists on exercising her agency, opting not for a company that manufactures food items and garments as per the initial suggestion, but one that deals in metals, representing her desire to be associated with a 'masculine' brand of business that revolves around bulk, mass and efficiency rather than fashion, which is seen as stereotypically feminine. Due to the gendered nature of her job as a sex worker, Lily has been subjected to many gendered insults, and the very stigma associated with the job of a sex worker

is that she does not participate in a socially approved, traditionally 'pure' form of sex that occurs within the discreet boundaries of marriage and is done for the process of producing children, but is instead selling sexual services and transforming the act into a mercenary venture, an enterprise that caters to nearly anyone who has the money and intent. Thus, Lily's desire to manage a metalworking enterprise reflects how fervently she has come to despise these notions, and wants desperately to transcend them.

However, as established at multiple points in this paper, sexism pervades every aspect of society, including the workplace, and Lily is not able to move past her former reputation despite the support offered to her by the scheme. Every time she strives to cast off her old identity and assert her agency, circumstances strike her with a painful reminder of how heavily the stain of prejudice clings to her. At multiple points, characters call her a 'whore' and issue insulting remarks about her former profession, ranging from various privileged men to even Ayesha, who is exasperated of working in a job she doesn't like and initially hates Lily's bold, outspoken personality, and also Lily's son, Vaibhav, who is bullied at school after rumors of Lily's profession spread, and blames her for ruining his life. This drives in the sheer contempt that Lily's profession invites- although it is no different, in a sense, than the jobs of the corporate workers who sell hours of their time at the cubicle in return for wages, she is still treated like someone impure, and the stain of her job is apparently enough to outweigh all the hard work she's put in to aid, support and protect her child.

When Lily finds herself disliking the advances that a local goon-turned-corporator named Vijay Sathe makes on her at a public function and turns him down, she receives swift retribution in the form of a smear campaign by his

lackeys, ranging from humiliating Vaibhav at school to sticking up insulting posters of her in the premises around the factory. Sathe, with his local connections and influence, exercises a form of soft power that is far stronger than Lily's 'legitimate' support by the scheme, because it has its roots in patriarchal structures and social conventions, which cannot be eroded with mere paperwork. Though Lily, by virtue of the ruthless environment she had to survive in, has grown adept in the arts of coercion and extortion, the men within this environment are far more resourceful than even her, and blackmail Lily just as she blackmailed Rani, showing us that the cycle of exploitation never ceases, and there is no definitive way to transcend it— if Lily wishes to enter this cutthroat corporate world, then she too must face the same challenges as the other three principal characters.

There exist various obstacles to the success of female Indian entrepreneurs, which include a lack of connections and support by investors, opposition by sexist males who believe them unfit for work, low self-confidence and depressive tendencies due to the initial difficulties, and a dearth of support and encouragement by their peers and family (Goyal and Parkash, 1998). This is amply clear with Lily, who faces discouragement both at the hands of Sathe, who refuses to allow a former sex worker to establish a factory because he believes that it is beyond her station; and is also mocked and dismissed by her fellow sex workers at first, and chided for being delusional and naïve. The pressure over the course of the series steadily worsens, until Lily nearly wants to quit the project, abandon the factory and flee the city, but ultimately decides to stay behind, and strive for success no matter what. Though her persistence is admirable, the obstacles that she faces despite the relatively independent nature of her position as

opposed to a spot in the corporate hierarchy stem from a deep-rooted sexism across society, which, like the cases of all the other women, cannot be escaped and improved without systemic change.

Conclusion: Towards a Kinder World

At its heart, *Bombay Begums* is a story about women battling the alienation sowed in their hearts by the toxicity of corporate workspace culture, which erects myriad barriers in their path to success and independence, and tears away chunks of their kindness, empathy and fulfilment every time they manage to break through. At the very pinnacle as well as the bottom of the ladder, sexism hangs like a dense, suffocating cloud, blinding women with brilliant visions and silencing those with valiant voices. The isolation, pressure and sexism faced by Rani, the burden of traditionally feminine roles and expectations borne by Fatima, the bitter trauma of sexual harassment faced by Ayesha, and the abject lack of respect, dignity and social mobility or capital afforded to Lily-- these are all issues that stem from the problematic perceptions of women in Indian culture, perpetrated by institutions that hoard socioeconomic power.

At no point in the corporate environment does the already-exploitative utilitarianism of company culture manifest without a vested conservatism and bigotry--women, even when possessed of enough merit to prove profitable to their companies, are still forced to endure and contend with sexism and discrimination in order to maintain their positions and retain some hopes of advancement. Even if they reach the top in such circumstances, one cannot claim that their financial success could in any way justify or forgive the trauma they have faced on the way up, and this is to say nothing of the

women who were not even able to find success, because the humiliations, indignities and pressures of their jobs hampered their ability to function. There exists not a single woman in the entire corporate world who has not been harmed to some extent by these barriers, and narratives like *Bombay Begums* drive in the need to shatter them, to reform the system, and to give women the power and opportunities they deserve. Without systemic change and the creation of safe spaces for women that encourage openness, solidarity and communication, there will never exist true safety and equality in the workspace. The message of *Bombay Begums* is thus that if women at every level do not band together and strive for reform, then both the reigns of the queens and the hopes of young dreamers shall prove woefully short-lived.

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