
The Female Gaze: Exploration of Female Sexuality in The Past Decade

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Abstract:

In our current social climate, conversations regarding the relationship between gender and sexuality are becoming more prevalent due to the digital activism cultivated by fourth-wave feminist ideals. Different from its predecessors such as post-feminism, fourth-wave feminism relies upon digital technology to cultivate a worldwide community of activists (Looft, 2017). Cinema has been studied as an apparatus of representation, an image machine developed to construct images or visions of social reality and the spectators' place in it. Women in this changing world have really come out and expressed themselves and their sexuality in different ways. This research paper explores the development of female gaze and female sexuality with the changing age in the present times.

Keywords: Bollywood, Female gaze, Female sexuality, Cinema, 21st century, movies

“One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight”

The film industry across the world is patriarchal. Though cinema is more than a hundred years old, its character has remained dominated by men-as directors, editors, actors, cinematographers, music directors, lyricists and so on. Most of the stories have men as the dominating character; women reflect their real-life situations as wives, mothers, lovers and daughters. Interestingly, the audience does not complain including the women in it.

The tide seems to have turned since films with women in dominating roles began to make their presence felt. Names like Marlene Dietrich, Mae West, Katherine Hepburn and Greta Garbo come to mind as they dominated the frames of the films they featured in, sometimes in male masquerade-dressed up in male costumes but basically understood as women-of as characters with a negative slant, or as sexy females. Indian cinema has been less lucky in placing women in the center of the narrative and cinematographic spaces of films. In *Producing Bollywood*, Tejasvini Ganti foundation bases of Bollywood movies that promote patriarchy, she claims:

“Bollywood has mainly a male-dominated culture, and men characters are offered considerably more significance than women roles” (Ganti,

2012, 187).

This reinforcement through popular influence is what Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2009) calls the “Cinema Effect” (107), which refers to the vast influence and exposure of the cinema and cultural industry that influences, defines, and redefines many facets of life. In this context, Rajadhyaksha asserts that:

“The ability of the cinema to produce a recognizable “reality” thus includes a narrative ability to enable transactions across symbolic registers. Further, these registers are at one level public symbolic formations, such as those constituting the paraphernalia of the state apparatus, but at other, more elusive levels, also structures designed to produce specialized conditions for the production of an objectivity that primarily underscores an authorizing gaze”

(Rajadhyaksha, 2009, 94).

According to Ahad and Akgul, “Over the past ten or so years, there has been an increase in Bollywood films featuring women due to the country's expanding public conversation on women” (2020). The thematic shift to focus on women's agency, embodiment, and the battle for empowerment and transformation can be observed in *No One Killed Jessica* (2011), *Gulab Gang* (2014), *The Dirty Picture* (2011), *Pink* (2016), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) and *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022). Now discussing the aforementioned movies in detail:

No One Killed Jessica:

For centuries women occupied a subordinate position in the patriarchal social order and in turn represented as a bearer rather than maker of meaning in several texts. Laura Mulvey noted that “women stand in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies

and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey, 2000). This argument can be seen in countless movies across generations and cultures. Mainstream Hindi film industry churned out countless movies where women represented as bearer rather than maker of meaning. However, the film *No One Killed Jessica* seems to be a departure from this trend. Its successful run at the box office implies most of the audience identifies with the film’s representation of society and individuals. As per general perception it had a strong impact on the society regarding the changing image of women. *No One Killed Jessica* perhaps one of the rare films where the male gaze is absent, largely because there are no male protagonists, no song and dance sequences, and no overt sexual shots. The female lead is represented in a very masculine form. The film paved the way for newer films to represent women and their issues in a positive light by breaking the existing stereotypes. From the sociological perspective films understood as a mirror which reflects the society but produces a limited or distorted reflection because of masculine bias. The film was purposively chosen for the study because the film was unusual in many respects. The film was based on a true story of Jessica Lal murder case that shocked the entire nation and generated a public outcry when the perpetrators were acquitted by a court. Subsequently, the media took up the case rigorously and managed to pressurize the higher courts to reopen the case and finally the guilty were put behind bars. The film showed touches of serious cinema as well. It has a combination of artistic and commercial acumen. Construction of reality presupposes the

establishment of reality. The basic premise of cinematic suspension of disbelief is the realization that all that appears real on screen is actually a construction of reality. The reality of Indian women has found its way straight into the silver screen. Since beginning, women in popular Hindi cinema have their set roles: somebody's daughter, wife, sister or mother. A modern woman has been portrayed to possess a less performative character. The film starts in a format of a hard-hitting documentary. This movie boasts of two main characters—Sabrina Lal (Vidya Balan) and Meera Gaity (Rani Mukherjee). Sabrina is shown to be simple, calm, nerdy, and docile and appears to be contended in her own space. She takes a back-seat in all the aspects of life as compared to her sister (Jessica Lal). She is media shy and far from the glamorous personality of Meera and Jessica.

“Films like No One Killed Jessica and characters like Meera Gaity happen very rarely. It was the right film at the right time. A majority of the people who watched the film liked it, but there was a section that didn't appreciate it much. They detested my character and argued that journalists are not like Meera! My question is, who decides? People live in denial most of the time. It is all right if a man abuses openly but not okay for a woman to do so. Meera is the first character of its type in Hindi cinema: foul mouthed, manipulative and powerful, but someone who has her ethics in place. She is today's working woman, economically and emotionally independent. Jessica unleashed a new language and attitude. Meera refrains from violence and therefore abuses. She is volatile but a patriot. No One Killed Jessica is about the changing newsroom. The media is the hero of the film! When director

Rajkumar Gupta met me, his only brief was - be yourself in costume and body language. And it worked! Costumes contribute to characterization, but mainstream film-makers”

Gulab Gang:

Gulab Gang is a feature film with Madhuri Dixit portraying the leader of a woman's group, perhaps trying to impose a beautiful face on the ordinary and rustic but Sampat Pal. While exploring the news reports appearing about Gulab Gang, the ethics of this celluloid 'imitation' came up. Let us ask ourselves what ethics lies behind hijacking and gutsy grassroots appropriating real life stories for feature films and capitalizing on important and positive movements by diverting attention from the real cause to synthetic glamour. Documentary filmmaker Nishtha Jain, whose Gulabi Gang won the Best Film Award in Muhr Asia Africa documentary section at the ninth Dubai Film Festival followed by a string of awards and nominations says, 'I found Sampat Pal amazing. She is completely self-taught and had the courage to break away from her in-laws to do the work she's doing now. I thought if these women, despite all their disadvantages, can injustice, so can anyone. It would be an inspiring tale to tell. So rise against I decided to go and meet Sampat Pal. Within days of observing at work, I realised that reality was more complicated than I thought that it would make for a more nuanced film. Gulabi Gang is a collective movement spearheaded by Sampat Pal. Gulab Gang is a commercial film. One journalist reports, 'Madhuri Dixit portrays the character of Rajjo who heads Gulabi Gang, a group of women dacoits dressed in pink saris that operates in the Bundelkhand region. The audience will get to see Madhuri in a rough, abusive and action-packed performance

unlike her other roles that have been very feminine and demure in nature.' So, a group of gutsy women have been turned into 'dacoits' with a single twist of the scriptwriter's pen! What kind of justice will this bring to Sampat Pal and her Gulabi Gang? Another unnamed source says, 'She (Madhuri Dixit) has worked with a team of professionals with whom she has learnt kick-boxing and high kicks moves for the film.' She reportedly trained under Shaolin master Shifu Kanishka Sharma. However, perhaps scared of reprisals from the media specially from the people of Bundelkhand in general and the women of Gulabi Gang in particular, the producer-director duo of Anubhav Sinha and Shoumik Sen have retracted from earlier stories in the media about the film being a celluloid representation of Gulabi Gang. Earlier, Anubhav Sinha said that his debut production venture Gulab Gang is not based on any real-life character contradicting all earlier stories about it being loosely based on activist Sampat Pal and her Gulabi Gang. However, Sinha cleared the air through his tweet and wrote:

“ The question that remains is--if the film has nothing to do with anyone's life, then why call the film Gulabi Gang and why make the women wear pink? And why is it set against the of Bundelkhand, where the real Gulabi Gang is the base of the movement? Bundelkhand in central India, a region notorious for its backdrop born and rebels-turned-armed bandits, is witnessing a new kind of rebellion with an unusual cast of characters. Bundelkhand is marked among the poorest of the poor in the district. Will this fit into the synthetic scenario of a Bollywood film? Using the name and the colour of the group and placing the story in Bundelkhand to tell a different story is not only unfair and unethical, it is also against

the morals that guide and rule creative artistic expression through a mass medium of entertainment like cinema. Instead of contributing to the real movement, it is likely to send across the wrong message to the right people every time! Was Gulab Gang a tribute to the real Gulabi Gang? Or is it a travesty of faith in cinema's ability to tell real stories in fictionalised form? It is best left to the viewers to judge.

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The Dirty Picture:

The Dirty Picture, directed by Milan Luthra (2011) has ushered in various debates around sexuality through its representation of sexuality and the corpus of texts surrounding it, such as the public image of the actor playing the lead role. The film is widely believed to have been inspired by the life of Indian film actor, Silk Smitha Played by Vidya Balan, Silk is shown as a small-town girl who makes it big in the film industry by her uninhibited and fearless sexuality. She threatens to topple the very foundations of the industry by flouting notions of what 'sells' and giving the consumer, presumably male, what he wants She is not afraid to sell her body and turns the oppressive male gaze to her advantage to further herself in the capitalist enterprise of the film industry, without any expression of shame or guilt. Such an articulation of sexuality by Silk prompts extreme reactions from various quarters-feminist groups within the film brand her as obscene, film magazines describe her as dirty and A-list film stars refuse to be

publicly seen with her, Silk, however, through her unapologetic embrace of her sexuality calls the bluff on the heavily sexualized film industry and is seen as exposing its hypocrisy. Thus, the film can be seen as making a strong political statement on society's attempt to regulate female sexuality.

Shiv Viswanathan, in his article titled *The Dirty Picture Free, Sexual and Female* hails the film as the stuff of sociology and the meat of a feminist critique of a male world' He writes, The film is a celebration of life, an ode to cinema and the liberating power of sexuality. This is a woman who enjoys sex and whose sexuality exudes power and freedom. The woman's body becomes her way of being herself Such an appraisal of the film resonates with the idea of sex-positive feminism, advocated by among others, feminists such as Gayle Rubin, Wendy McElroy, and Susie Bright Sex-positive feminism sees sexual freedom as central to women's freedom and opposes legal and social efforts to control sexual activities among consenting adults. Sex-positive feminists suggest that free acts of female sexual expression are liberating for all women as such acts challenge the traditionally repressed nature of female sexuality. However, to read a film like *The Dirty Picture* solely within a sex-positive feminist frame is to ignore the Institutional considerations that fuel a film produced commercially in Bollywood group of the present-day film industry and the material and socio-economic considerations regulating it is complicated when considering the questions of choice and agency of the actors that *The Dirty Picture* incorporates the character of Silk and Vidya Balan, the actor playing the character of Silk The transposition of an earlier era into the current one and the difference

in the way the two actors Vidya Balan and Silk Smitha, are perceived, allows the film to be seen as belonging to a post-feminist culture.

Most would contend that Silk existed in a largely exploitative industry that allowed little space for women and her overt sexualisation and objectification by the industry was not an aspect that was negotiable. An example of this is the representation of the instances of men, who come to her with offers of employment. looking at Silk lasciviously or the light-hearted manner in which the casting-couch of the industry is represented. Within the film, the casting couch seems to be justified in the film as a female form of capitalist enterprise. In the case of *The Dirty Picture*, the character of Silk manages to seduce an A-list actor, Suryakanth which then opens up a plethora of opportunities for her in terms of her career. The implication is that within the exploitative industry, this is the only form of agency that she could exercise. However, outside the text of the film, such an exercise of agency is still seen as questionable, if not morally reprehensible This is further reinforced by the proliferation of media outlets, in the form of advertising, talk shows and print media, all of which have a symbiotic relationship with the film, in which the subject position of the actor is reinforced outside the text of the film Vidya Balan, said about her performance in a show on NDTV,

*"In Silk Smitha's case, it was pure exploitation. While in my case, I allowed the exploitation as an actress in *The Dirty Picture*. It's the choice that is empowering She reaffirms in an interview with *India Today*, on being asked if she ever faced the kind of exploitation Silk did"*

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Pink:

Pink movie reminds the audience of Jodi Foster's 'The Accused' in which her character is gang-raped in a bar because of

the dressing she carries that is, she wears a short skirt, and has been drinking, she is made out to be a woman on the make. Something similar happens in the same story where all three women who have to bear the brunt of the rage and in the end male entitlement comes with: 'aisi ladkiyon ke saath toh aisa hi hota hai'. Here what does the mentality of the common boys tend to be when he says that "Aisi Ladkiya." Who defines the character and rules for the women in the society?. Why does the society have different set of rules for socialization and rearing boys and girls. The movie examines the set of rules mentioned by Mr. Amitabh Bachhan and the arguments shown in the court hearing and tries to unveil some hidden and the social mores that its women have live and socialize in the society which is buried under crippling patriarchy and misogyny with a sense of mistaken shame. When a girl says no, it means only one thing. It means a straight no, No grabbing and no forcing. Why people and society considers women as easy going and person of loose morals. The theme of pink movie taken up by Bollywood is a movie which is so simple and clear. It gives direct message without beating about the bush, without prevaricating or using obscure language. It tells us a great deal about the country we live in. Here the story clearly shows if a girl is pawed or victimized, the girl must have done something to provoke the molester.

Rape and sexual molestation are social as well as a personal crime where in the female body becomes the site of contestation between power and powerlessness, between imposition and freedom, between the system and the individual. The moment there is a protest, all social institutions - marriage, family, law, all ideas of respectability and loyalty conspire to silence the female voice. It

is common knowledge that rape is one of the least reported events due to a variety of reasons. One of them is that it results in a long drawn legal battle, humiliation and public exposure. The film takes up for its subject not merely sexual molestation but the problem of redressal in a court of law. The aim is not to provide a solution but to raise a whole lot of questions regarding women's position in a patriarchal society. Almost all social institutions treat the woman as a body forcing her to subordinate her will.

Lipstick under my Burkha

At the very outset, Lipstick begs us to pay attention to grey areas and suspend the safety of black-and-white judgements. The very title of the film grapples with the question of whether the burkha — an object that is coded as conservative — necessarily inhibits women's freedom. And whether lipstick — an object that is coded as liberatory — necessarily translates into empowerment. The title Lipstick Under My Burkha might seem to suggest a bias towards lipstick over the burkha. One can easily read the film as showing women wanting desperately to come out of the burkha and embrace the world that the lipstick inhabits. However, in the film, women share a vexed relationship with both the lipstick and the burkha. While Rehana wants to wear jeans and lipstick, discarding her burkha, Shirin finds that burkha is an ally in her tactics to be financially independent. As Usha reads erotica titled Lipstick-wale Sapne to re-eroticize her body, lipstick gets Rehana in trouble and lands her in jail. And this is precisely where Lipstick's feminism begins — in the willingness of its women to take risks in the pursuit of their desires, even if that involves troubles and hardships. The women in the film are both 'lipstick-feminists' and 'burkha-

feminists’.

Where patriarchy instructs women to be constantly surveilled and held back paternalistically, Lipstick’s women refuse such a control. While Usha is expected to live a chaste life and devote her time to religious practices, she secretly joins swimming classes to be closer to her object of desire, Jaspal, her young and hunky swimming coach. She gets involved in phone-sex with him, eventually taking the risk to meet him in person; a risk that gets her expelled from her house. However, this is not a defeat for her. In the film’s universe, the pleasure is not in what the women desire but rather in how they pursue them. And this pleasure of the chase, for Lipstick’s women, in itself is a form of freedom, a right that is rewarding. Their failure to possess the object of their desire then is somewhat irrelevant.

The film reminds of women that for too long have been deprived of their bodies, objectified in cinema and ‘written’ by the male gaze. Woman has often been presented as an object to be looked at, not as a subject that wields gaze and thus power. Instead, Lipstick subverts this ideology of the male-gaze, either by rejecting it or by inverting and making it “lady-oriented.” The burkha symbolizes this inversion of the male-gaze: looking out from under the burkha rather than being looked at, and how the refusal of ‘being looked at’ might allow women in certain socio-cultural settings to do things with that temporary invisibility. There are sex scenes in the film involving Leela as well as a scene in which Usha is masturbating, none of which depict women’s bodies in a titillating, voyeuristic fashion. The narrative that runs through the film makes it clear that we are experiencing the world through the

eyes of desiring women.

Women wield the binoculars of fantasy in this film. Lipstick's women appropriate the NGO-feminist slogan "my body, my rights" to say "my body, my pleasure!" Even as these women are shown struggling to claim equal rights, they are triumphant in claiming their pleasures. The pleasures that are often denied to women around the world, even as they might enjoy several other "rights." The four protagonists' insistence to not give up on their bodies and its pleasures is at the core of the film and its feminist politics. In this sense, the film is not only deeply feminist, but it also presents a sort of manifesto for a feminist politics of pleasure that puts the spotlight on women's desires and sexuality in a manner that is not restricted to the basic minimum women's rights. This feminism is a process that involves a constant negotiation and re-negotiation between soaring desires and a more moribund culture, simultaneously allowing women to reclaim their bodies in a register other than that of extreme violence and shame. It asks us to push the borders of our feminist politics, and think of rights, freedoms and justice beyond the notions sanctioned by patriarchal law. The CBFC deemed Lipstick dangerous because it could empower women to assert their autonomy and express their desires. Even as they remain in the realm of fantasy, possibly out of reach of the four women at the end of the film, these are nonetheless desires — active and mobile, risky but exhilarating — that threaten the patriarchal social order.

At the end of the film, after Usha is thrown out of her house, Leela, Shirin and Rehana come to give her succour. The four women bond over their potentially thwarted desires but they do not cry over their

unfulfilled desires, they laugh instead. Theirs is a subversive laughter that “jams sociality,” in the French feminist Helene Cixous’s words. They become Cixous’s “beautiful” Medusa, who laughs “in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter.” As the official poster of the film makes visually evident, Lipstick’s desire, and its feminism, is to raise this middle-finger to patriarchy.

If feminism fundamentally asks us to think about gender and how it is constructed, then we have to attend to the borders that gender creates. When Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak speaks of building a feminist world, she talks about

“the long-term work of imagining the borderlessness that attends to borders. To be borderless is also a pleasure for the female. We cannot deny this pleasure as we are working towards a feminist world...”

Lipstick pays heed precisely to this politics of borderlessness. It gives us female bodies that cannot be contained; that will move, explode, speak up, and write their self in a way that Cixous urges women to. It gives us unapologetic women who take risks, come down from the pedestals that men place them on, and embrace their imperfections; women who risk human failures that have long been inaccessible to them.

“The burkha – and perhaps this is inadvertent – which is used as a symbol of oppression and secrecy also becomes a means to lie and steal. When Shireen, a successful saleswoman on the verge of a promotion, realises her abusive husband is cheating on her, she tracks down the “other woman” but says nothing to her husband.

In her feminism, she gives in to patriarchy. The saving grace as far as feminism is Usha Buaji who owns the building and runs a successful business but even she is publicly humiliated by the young man she has a crush on.

Even worse from a human point of view is that the other men and women around them are all bound by the shackles of prejudice. These four women cannot find even one ally. And yet, there are glimpses of freer people around them; just glimpses. Perhaps those are the feminist icons, although some also fall victim to the smoking-drinking-sex-pregnancy-abortion route to women's empowerment."

Gangubai Kathiawada:

Based on author and journalist Hussain S. Zaidi's 2011 book, 'Mafia Queens of Mumbai', Gangubai Kathiawadi is a visually seductive manifestation. Director S.L. Bhansali mounts lead actress Alia Bhatt on a scale so imposing that she feels almost intergalactic – not of this land and earth. Set in the red-light district of Kamathipura in the 1950s and 60s, Gangubai opens up on a violent and lurid note. After being sold to a brothel, a 14-year-old girl is decked up for business, but she will not give up. Nose-pin pierced in her nose and lipstick slapped on her face cannot make any impact on her. Even Gangubai, with the swagger of a veteran sex worker intermingled with her flashback into Ganga, cannot talk some sense into the 14-year girl. The focal thrust of this essay is set on the socio-historic issues of prostitution as reflected in Gangubai Kathiawadi, apart from the 'usual' legal issues. With the help of 'positionality' by American legal academic Katharine Bartlett at every stage of the film, the film is able to expose how the law has

excluded perspectives of women/other excluded groups, based on knowledge derived from experiences. However, the issue of 'white solipsism' remains unaddressed in the film.

In the film, 'intersectional feminism' in terms of academic Nivedita Menon has been advanced to acknowledge how women from marginalised communities encounter oppression on manifold fronts – profession, gender, social and financial status, health, education, among other reasons.

From prostitute to Madam of Kamathipura: As per Bartlett, 'positionality' builds on the concept of knowledge based on experience. It acknowledges the existence of empirical values, truth, and knowledge. For instance, the woman will be able to understand how power works, how it is masked by the 'objective' rules, the need to change it from the woman's perspective of exclusion.

The film gives a much-needed glimpse into the life of a sex worker. However, it goes without saying that the later trajectory of a film revolves around the matriarch of Kamathipura instead of expanding upon the perspectives of the 4,000 sex workers. In between acquiring a Bentley and taking swipes at her rivals, a short cute romance is portrayed between a young tailor, Afsaan (Shantanu Maheshwari), and Gangubai. Both go on dates only for Gangubai to have clarity about the sort of touch that she craves- the one that gives, doesn't want. In the film, Bhatt employs some masculine gestures but stashes the character and its power acutely feminine since it is stomached out of that experience. When Gangubai is out and about, she keeps her head ensconced with a short saree pallu. Still, her legs are sprawled out, even in polite

company, communicating that her regard for the world outside Kamathipura is kerbed and has a short vehemence. Moreover, in the film, 'intersectional feminism' in terms of academic Nivedita Menon has been advanced to acknowledge how women from marginalised communities encounter oppression on manifold fronts – profession, gender, social and financial status, health, education, among other reasons. When Gangu delivered her speech in Azad Maidan pressing for rights and dignity for sex workers, she was, in her own style, sponsoring intersectional feminism. This is why what Gangu did is so heroic. She said, *“Yes, I am a sex worker, and you better respect me for it”*. This is not to say that she was glorifying the trade itself. After all, she fought for the right to education of the kids of Kamathipura so they do not have to work their mothers had to.

Conclusion:

It's fitting that film has become one of the most outspoken industries to start pushing for visibility and access for women, as it was from film we began to understand more clearly the Male Gaze, a term coined by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film. Looking to canonical figures such as Alfred Hitchcock or Marilyn Monroe, Mulvey outlines the ways that women have been historically used as tools or objects to project male desire upon, rather than subjects with their own desires and agency. The Female Gaze is thus a reclamation of women's power to see and be seen on their own terms – outside of heterosexual desire or societal constraints. It allows women to break out of the confines of objectivity and start creating their own narratives. And in Bollywood, specially in the

past decade, women have changed their image on screen and even being behind the camera, that has been established with this research paper. However, outside the text of the film, such an exercise of agency is still seen as questionable, if not morally reprehensible.

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