

## EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN FROM MALE GAZE: CHANGES IN REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN FILMS

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### Abstract

New feminism is a continuation of earlier feminisms but differs slightly as it emphasizes on the idea that woman is an individual with an equal worth as man while accepting the natural sexual differences. Indian Films have always portrayed women in the stereotypical roles of passive, submissive and dependent objects of visual pleasure. British Feminist Film Theorist Laura Mulvey, in her essay titled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', talks about the Male Gaze and how women are presented as the object of voyeurism, which means 'to-be-looked-at-ness' objects. This paper attempts to look at the changes brought in the representation of woman from the stereotypical pleasurable object to the emancipated lead actor who overcame the male gaze and became an independent and strong woman. The paper observes this change of representation in Gouri Shinde's film "English Vinglish". The film is about an Indian woman who overcomes the patriarchal obstacles and becomes successful and independent. The focus is also on the contemporary Indian female directors. Unlike most of the male directors, these female directors break away from showing the woman as passive and pleasurable objects. They represent their emancipation through independent women characters who are not dependent on men.

### Keywords

Stereotypes, Male-gaze, Voyeurism, Emancipation, and Female directors

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A film is a form of Art that reflects society. The film, like Literature, expresses human ideas and feelings. In contemporary society, the film has become the most popular form of art that can attract people in large numbers. The film is not only a form of entertainment but has also become a form of art that can bring about social awareness and can result in social reformation. Films have always portrayed women in the stereotypical roles of passive, submissive, dependent and visual pleasure objects. Women have always been objectified as men's pleasurable object on the screen across the films of the world.

Film industries of the world are mainly dominated by men. In almost all the crafts of the film-making, it is men who dominated and that domination is still present in our times too. With the advent of feminism, women also started entering into all the departments of film-making. So now the scenario has changed a lot. Women are into direction, production, acting, script and dialogue writing, music, cinematography, editing, artwork, dances, stunts, costume designing, etc. But still, it is men who are ruling the films. Yet it is good to see quite a number of women entering and lots more are aspiring to be part of film-making not to be represented by patriarchal men as the stereotypical object, but to emancipate and represent woman as an independent subject.

A film director is known as the captain of the ship called 'Film-making'. Film Director is the one who guides members of all the other departments. It is the director's vision that is portrayed in the film. This view was developed as 'Auteur Theory' by French New Wave Film Makers and Critics Andre Bazin and Francois Truffaut. They expressed that the director brings the film to life and uses it to express his/her feelings on the subject matter. This auteur theory is further developed by American Film Theorist Andrew Sarris in his essay 'Notes on the Auteur Theory' in 1962. He says that a director is the author of his film. Just like an author represents human life with a pen, a film director represents human life with a camera. The settings, lights, background, color combinations, various symbols used are all the visions of the film director. A director represents human life on the screen by using lots of semiotic signs aided by dialogues and music. Andrew Sarris gives the examples of Famous Directors of his time like Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Renoir, Charles Chaplin, Griffith, and Sternberg. He says that each of them is the author of his own films and their films have their own style and representation of life on screen.

When it comes to the representation of woman in films, male directors have shown the patriarchal attitude. From the beginning of Films, that is way back in the 1920s to till now most of the Male directors always portrayed women as mere objects of pleasure. This is not only in Hollywood but also all the regional woods of every nation that is making films today. Laura Mulvey, a British Feminist Film Theorist talks about the representation of women in films especially in Hollywood. She talks about 'voyeurism' which means pleasure in looking at people as objects. She talks about the 'Male Gaze' in the films. She says that woman is

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seen as the pleasurable object of man. She used the term 'to-be-looked-at-ness' to describe how the male directors have made a woman as the pleasurable object. She talks about three types of male gazes in a film. First, is of the camera as it records the cinematic events. Second, is of the audience as they watch the finished film and the third gaze is of the characters within the screen as they look at each other. In all the three gazes, the woman is the image or the object of the look while the man is the bearer of the look. She links this male gaze to the patriarchal ideology. She had brought out the point that when a man directs a movie, he sees the woman from the camera with the patriarchal ideology as a mere object of sexual pleasure and a passive and weak person to be rescued by a male protagonist. He also makes his characters to look with the male gaze and even the spectators are unconsciously forced to have the same male gaze.

In the Indian scenario too, whether it is Bollywood, Kollywood, Tollywood or Mollywood the situation is the same. Women are presented as glamour dolls. The protagonists are mostly men while women are only used as sexual objects to satisfy the sexual fantasies of not only the male protagonist but also of the audience. Almost all male directors use the so-called 'heroines' as the eroticizing object of the hero as well as the audience. The typical stereotypes of woman as weak and passive object are highlighted consciously or unconsciously by most of the male directors. Close up shots of the female's body are shown in the films to eroticize the body as an object. Now the trend went much further with the so-called 'item songs' in a film. Nowadays it's very rare to see any mainstream Indian movie without an item song where the female's body is exposed and exhibited to the maximum.

As an alternative to avoid this male gaze in films, Laura Mulvey proposes the new feminist avant-garde film-making. So when a woman directs a film, it will be different from a man's direction. Since the director is the author of a film, the female director will give a different representation of life. It is good that women also are in directing films. But we can see even some female directors have been forced to use the male gaze in their films in order to survive in the industries, for example, Farah Khan, the director of films such as Om Shanthi Om and Happy New Year. Yet there are few Indian female directors who tried to avoid this male gaze like Aparna Sen, Nandita Das, Revathy and Deepa Mehta.

Gourd Shined is one such director whose film 'English Vinglish' is a major breakthrough from the traditional patriarchal films. English Vinglish is a film that emancipated woman from the patriarchal gaze and represented her as an independent woman with self-respect. The film is about a woman who runs her own family as well as does a small business of making and selling ladoos. She constantly gets mocked for not knowing English by her own husband and her daughter. She feels humiliated and disrespected but doesn't tell that to anyone. Things change dramatically when she goes to New York for her niece wedding. She decides to learn English and successfully learns and gets the respect and appreciations of everyone. Film

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Critic Anupama Chopra in her review of the film writes English Vinglish is that rare thing – a Hindi film that creates a heroine out of a homemaker. Shashi, played by Sridevi, is a beautiful, accomplished woman who efficiently manages her home, husband, mother-in-law and two children. She also runs a small business making ladoos. The lady director, Gouri Shinde makes a protagonist out of a homemaker. Yes, when a female takes the megaphone as the director the representation of a woman is changed. There is no male protagonist who will rescue the heroine. The heroine in the film is a homemaker. There is no skin shows in the film. No vulgar dialogues and no item song. It's a clean movie that represented an Indian homemaker who gets her much desired respect from the family when she learns English with determination.

The opening scene itself is so symbolic where Shashi is presented as a typical Indian homemaker who binds the whole family. There's a Hindu morning song played out, as she serves breakfast, tea, and biscuits to her husband, mother-in-law and the two children. She finds no time to enjoy her own coffee and to read the newspaper. Shashi feels happy about her role as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. But her own husband constantly asks her to stop making ladoos, though she is happy for making money through her passion for making and selling ladoos. Her own daughter Sapna, disrespects her for not knowing English and talking in Hindi with her friends' parents and the class teacher in the Parent-Teacher Meeting. Shashi feels so sad and says "No matter how hard I try, I just can't seem to please anyone". Satish, her husband says "My wife, she was born to make ladoos" and laughs loudly as the other crowd in the family function joins him in the mocking laughter. He justifies his statement, saying it's a compliment for her. But it's the small humiliations and slights that scar Shashi". Shashi decides to show them that she too can talk in English. That is to earn the love and respect of her own family members. But in between, she was almost giving up when her son Sagar gets injured in her absence. But then her friends help her by phoning the classes to her. So her emancipation takes place as she successfully learns to communicate in Good English at the end of the film.

Some dialogues in the film are so realistic and make us think deep. For example, Shashi says to her classmates, the French guy about cooking "When a man cooks, it's an Art but when a woman cooks it's her daily job and duty." French Man replies "No, food is art and food is love when you cook with love, food is good". When French Man says he likes Shashi and he comes to class only to see her because she is beautiful, for which Shashi replies "After a long long time, someone has spoken something good about me and I was taken aback". This dialogue reminds us of how badly she wanted positive words from her family. When Radha her niece, finds out that the French Man Laureate likes Shashi, she questions her whether she too loves him. Shashi replies "Radha, I don't need love, but some respect."

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In the final scene, Shashi gets up to give a speech in English about Marriage. Her husband gets up and says that his wife's English is not good then she stops him and stands up confidently to talk. She says the whole gathering starts applauding her speech with loud clapping and cheering. This is how Gouri Shinde presents a woman's emancipation from a patriarchal weak homemaker and represents her as an independent woman who realizes her responsibilities as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law yet has her own self-respect and is a small entrepreneur herself out of her passion for making ladoos. So in the hands of these new feminist female filmmakers, a heroine is not for the skin shows. She is emancipated from passive woman to an active woman. She is represented as a person who commands respect and love from the family and society. Because she is independent and with her multiple, unrecognized yet faithful responsibilities, she makes and unites the family.

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