
The Changing Economy of Sexual Desire in Hindi Cinema: Cinematic Interventions by Women Directors

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Abstract

Films are a powerful medium and practice involving both art and enterprise. As much as films are a pervasive and potent art form, they are also a business enterprise that provides pleasure, escape, illusion and entertainment with the purpose of making profit. The dominant trends in cinema, all over the world, have developed along complex dynamics of 'voyeurism', representation of the body (primarily female) as the object of desire. The present paper aims to analyze the emergence of a counter trend where a new wave of women directors, in Hindi cinema, have completely overturned the ways in which desire (female) is portrayed with the desiring subject as female. Films made by women directors open a whole new world of female experience of sexuality, bonding and relationships not subjected to the controlling male agency of narration. In this context, the paper analyzes the work of three women directors – Deepa Mehta, Shonali Bose and Alankrita Shrivastava who through their groundbreaking films: Fire (1996), Water (2005), Margarita with a Straw (2014) and Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016) are playing a catalytic role in changing the economy of sexual desire in Hindi Cinema. These films challenge and dismantle the views around the female body as an object that needs to be protected (something that has been the pivotal action concern of many Hindi films in the 1980s and 90s). At the same time, the paper also looks into the chronology of how the discourse of the body has changed in the last 15 years from Deepa Mehta to Alankrita Shrivastava in Indian Cinema.

Keywords: hindi cinema, women directors, Fire, Water, margarita, Lipstick

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INTRODUCTION

Films are a powerful medium and practice involving both art and enterprise. As much as films are a pervasive and potent art form, a substantial volume of them are also business enterprise providing pleasure, escape, illusion and entertainment with the purpose of making profit. Films are motion pictures that revolutionized entertainment and its paraphernalia wherein the entire film apparatus has evolved to focus on new dimensions of representation. The dominant trends in commercial cinema, all over the world, have developed along complex dynamics of 'voyeurism', representation of the body (primarily female) as the object of desire. The story framework of commercial cinema presents the male hero as mighty, powerful and an agent around whom the entire dramatic action unfolds. Thus, commercial cinema has "perfected a visual machinery suitable for male desire" (Smelik, 1998: 10). Film critics have argued that "the male gaze works in cinema as a form of voyeurism objectifying the woman's body and turning it into a passive spectacle" (Smelik, 2016:1). Commercial films, in the framework of this paper, are primarily the mainstream Hindi films that replicate and express the vision of the male brigade (director, producer, story writer, cinematographer and so on) reflecting and fulfilling desires of the male audience. This entire mechanism has been working, for decades, through identification of the female body as passive and the female viewer in the marginal viewing position. Commercial Hindi cinema, in general, objectifies the heroine/s who are often seen gyrating among lecherous men in item numbers/songs with obscene lyrics. Such films produce false conceptions and perceptions about real women and their desires. This scenario offers no opportunity to the female audience for an authentic identification with what is portrayed, rather the cinematic representation superimposes fantasy with stereotypes for identification. The consequential impact of such a portrayal is alienating rather than emancipating. With this background, the present paper aims to analyze the emergence of a counter trend where a new wave of women directors, in Hindi cinema, have completely overturned the ways in which desire (female) is portrayed with the desiring subject as female. Commercial Hindi cinema, just like other mainstream film industries around the world, has been a male dominated industry in all sections till the last century. In the new millennium, there has been a sea change in the industry dynamics wherein women directors, filmmakers as well as the more informed and liberated female audience have been able to creatively exploit, use and consume both at the site of production and reception.

TRENDS IN HINDI CINEMA

Traditional Indian society approves and endorses roles which control the conduct of

women. The archetypal woman is conceptualized as Sita (*Ramayana*) who is both an ideal wife and mother. Majority of commercial Hindi films from 1960s to 90s like *Mamta* (1966), *Sati Savitri* (1973), *Sansar* (1987); *Ghar ho to aisa* (1990) and many more represent this role of the ideal Indian woman with approbation and unflinching reverence. The cultural ideal of the virtuous woman has further been celebrated in family drama films, popular among audiences especially women, which showcased the image of “woman of eternal sacrifice” (Kavoori, 2008:192) who was denied any sexual identity (such as *Biwi ho to Aisi* (1988); *Arpan*, 1983; *Agar Tum Na Hote*, 1983; *Jeevan Dhara*, 1982; *Baseraa*, 1981). Additionally, the entire mechanism that works towards constructing the virgin/vamp dichotomy, in popular Hindi films, is the result of the culturally approved and disapproved non-sexual/sexual behavior in women which either gets regulated or is disavowed. The mainstream Hindi cinema has also been very consistent with its stereotypical representation of the vamp popularized by the erstwhile actors like Helen, Bindu and Aruna Irani who were used, to highlight the dichotomy between the chaste ‘pure’ heroine and the femme fatale. The trend of Hindi films in the 90s was predominantly focused on tradition-modernity dialectics with most films evoking nostalgic sentiments of the NRIs and preaching Indian ‘values’ with an authoritative male father or grandfather figure at the center (example *Hum Apke Hain Kaun*, 1994; *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge*, 1995; *Pardes*, 1997; *Hero No. 1*, 1997; *Hum Saath Saath Hain*, 1999; *Hum Dil de Chuke Sanam*, 1999; *Biwi No. 1*, 1999). The trend continues in the new millennium also wherein films celebrate the joint family as ideal Indian family and foreground domestic bliss in the affirmation and harmonious synthesis of traditional family and social values. All these films “envisage the ideal Indian woman as one who is both modern and traditional” (Habib, 2017:182). On the other side, there is also the reproduction of the “heteronormative, fetishized female body...for physical commodification” (Kavoori, 2008:194) in item numbers that gradually became an inextricable part of commercial Hindi films after the late 1990s. Item numbers are a “signifier of a sexualised dance performance” (Brara, 2010:68) in commercial Hindi and regional cinema; that are also performed at off-screen social events, dance bars, weddings, live stage performances etc. The term item number expresses the commodification of sexuality and sexual desire as part of the contemporary urban aesthetic. Film songs such as *baby doll*, *Sheila ki jawani*, *kamariya*, *dilbar* and many more portray gym-toned women as agents of titillation. This sexual politics and power dynamics of sexual imagery have been overtly played out in mainstream Hindi films for a long time. This categorization and commodification of female sexuality is a reflection of the male gaze wherein the entire filmmaking process as well as film reception is controlled by the production houses which are male dominated and cater to the male audience who fantasize such women characters and dancers. In recent decades, filmmakers and women directors,

in particular, have gone against the mainstream trends and created contents addressing overlapping identities, inequalities and diversity of experiences. In the overwhelmingly male dominated Hindi film industry, there are women filmmakers who have made their mark after long struggles with establishments, authorities, fund crunch and lack of support from the film fraternity. Despite such adverse scenario and not so smooth production, publicity and film release process, filmmakers like Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair, Kalpana Lazmi, Shonali Bose and Alankrita Shrivastava have devised ways to “operate within the industry economically, ideologically, and aesthetically” (Osterweil, 2006:67). The central concern of this paper is with films, directed by women, which have sought to represent and communicate women’s desire differently. These women directors have made films which have transformed cinematic representations and plot conventions; at the same time creating new visual and narrative pleasures centered on female subjectivity. These changes are attributed to the transformations in the production processes with the entry of corporate players, shift in power structures in the industry as well as the outlook of the audience. In this background, the paper argues that mainstream Hindi cinema is continually evolving and reflecting changing trends in portrayal of gender un-stereotyping. This is most visible in the cinema created by women filmmakers who are undoing “the spell of a culturally dominant fantasy of the eternal feminine by showing the ‘real’ life of ‘real’ women on the silver screen” (Smelik, 1998:8). The new brigade of female directors is producing the everyday life of a ‘normal’ woman who may come across as unglamorous but is, in every right, a sexual being. The shift is also towards female audience who now identify with lifelike women characters that are not defined within the paradigms of sexist clichés and hyperbolic stereotypes. Films made by women directors open a whole new world of female sexuality, bonding and relationships not subjected to the controlling male agency of narration.

THE RESEARCH BUILT-UP

Women filmmakers bring in new imagery and an iconography, particular to women, to articulate and explore the body as agency, with immense possibilities, vindicating and demystifying female sexuality. In this context, the paper analyzes the work of three women directors – Deepa Mehta, Shonali Bose and Alankrita Shrivastava who through their groundbreaking films: *Fire* (1996), *Water* (2005), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) are playing a catalytic role in changing the economy of sexual desire in Hindi Cinema. These films challenge and dismantle the views around the female body as an object that needs to be protected or worshipped (something that has been the pivotal action concern of many Hindi films in the 1980s and 90s). At the same time,

the paper also looks into the chronology of how the discourse of the body has changed in the last 15 years from Deepa Mehta to Alankrita Shrivastava in Indian Cinema. With this emphasis, the paper concludes with the observation that there has been a quantum leap from a complete absence of women filmmakers and directors in commercial Hindi cinema to their interventionist contribution both at the site of production and reception. The main premises of this paper are that it argues how there have been shifts in the filmmaking machinery wherein Hindi cinema has evolved to represent shift in sensibilities and voice the concerns of the marginalized groups. Women filmmakers since the last two decades have been making films that challenge the detrimental portrayal and objectification of female identity and desires. It also cannot be ignored that mainstream Hindi cinema is continually evolving and reflecting changing trends in gender portrayal by weaving narratives of divergent sexualities. Exploration of these prepositions involves examining films that offer tools for the “critical analysis of moving images in historical as well as contemporary contexts” (Institutionen för mediastudier, Stockholms universitet, 2017). The design adopted in this study is indicative of a hermeneutical and qualitative research tradition. Thus, the methodology adopted here is based on exploring certain aspects of critical thinking. Accordingly, evidence based case studies fits to the central idea that involves explorative as well as descriptive and explanatory dimensions. The case studies are the evidence of cinemas, and that context which is unique. This further provides a narrative based on a degree of investigative generalizability, and relevancy to other similar environments, phenomena, and situations. Accordingly four specific contexts of cinema (*Fire* (1996), *Water* (2005), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016)) as case evidence have been presented to validate the premises above.

THE SEXUAL SUBALTERN IN FIRE (1996)

Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1996) is the first part of her trilogy (*Earth*, 1998, and *Water*, 2005) connecting “the elemental with the feminine” (Mukherjee, 2008:36) and exposing the ways in which women are subjugated and bartered by patriarchy. Deepa Mehta, the Indo-Canadian film maker, showed immense courage in challenging the dominating masculine beliefs and practices in these films. *Fire* explored female love and desire at odds with regressive Indian masculinity. *Fire* involves the attraction between two sisters-in-law, Sita (Nandita Das) and Radha (Shabana Azmi) who are married to two brothers, Ashok (Kulbushan Kharbanda) and Jatin (Jaaved Jaaferi). The two men are represented as almost uniformly undesirable and resistible. While Ashok is preoccupied with his search for spiritual salvation, Jatin has an affair that he refuses to end even after his marriage. The household is ruled by the bell of the

mother-in-law who, having suffered a paralytic stroke, is unable to speak. The two sisters-in-law gradually develop an intimate bond that culminates in a sex sequence. When discovered by Ashok, Radha refuses to supplicate before her husband for forgiveness and chooses instead to leave the home and her marriage, which has denied her pleasure for thirteen years. The film received a number of acting and directorial awards outside of India. Fire played to full houses throughout the country for nearly three weeks before members of women's wing of the Shiva Sena, the Mahila Agadhi led violent protests against the film. A number of cinema owners cancelled further screenings of the film. The protesting groups argued that the film was an assault on Indian cultural values, by representing the sisters-in-law in a lesbian relationship and appropriating cultural rituals such as *kharvachuth*, to celebrate the 'perverse' bond between Radha and Sita. The film was seen as a threat to the institution of the family, and obscene by virtue of its sexual content. Mehta, very categorically, stated in an interview that she did not make the film depicting lesbian relationship rather it was more about "choices, the choices we make in life which may lead to alienation. By the bisexuality theme in the film, I have just shown an extreme choice." (Let's Talk about Bollywood, 2011). The story of the film reflects how culture is something that is constantly negotiated in the process of construction. And it is this process that has been used in the film "to create space for the subaltern including, in this instance, the sexual subaltern - the lesbian subject" (Kapur, 2000:57). At every point in the film, Hindu culture is invoked to counter the dominant cultural interpretation that is frequently used in relation to both 'Sita' and 'Radha' in mythology. The representation of female desire, the "inversion of cultural myths and themes, the agency of Hindu women within the joint family all destabilize the dominant understanding of culture, of Hindu culture" (Kapur, 2000). Mehta redefines the economy of female desire against the cultural backdrop of middle class Hindu joint family and shows how contemporary Indian women are negotiating the tensions between duty and desire. Both women move away from compulsions of duty, traditional expectations and compulsory heterosexuality (Ghosh, 1998). Both women exercise agency and choose; they don't fall for each other due to bad marriages, they choose one another. Their choices are partly informed by desire, a desire that Radha passionately asserts when she leaves Ashok and announces that she desires Sita, 'her love, her warmth and her body'. And it is this compelling desire for one another that ultimately becomes disruptive of existing familial, sexual and cultural arrangements (Kapur, 2000). The passion between Radha and Sita is located in the home from which it emerges in its raw nakedness to rupture the cultural edifices of family and marriage, leaving both institutions as well as the protagonists partly transformed (Kapur, 2000).

ECOSYSTEM OF EXPLOITATION IN WATER (2005)

Water is the story of widows living destitute life in the holy city of Benares in 1930s with the background of Indian freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. The film is set at a time when struggle against the colonial rule in India was at its peak with Gandhi heading the *satyagraha* movement against the British. The main protagonist in the film is a child widow Chuiya who is forced to follow the strict rules of widowhood in the *vidhva ashram* along the Ganges in Benares. Widows in the ashram are of different ages and temperaments representing varied impacts of this forced life of deprivation of food, affection, warmth, celebration etc. The matriarch of the ashram, Madhumati dominates over all others, sending a young widow Kalyani (Lisa Ray) who hasn't cut her hair off like the others, as a prostitute to the rich *zamindars* with the help of a transvestite pimp. There is Shakuntala (Seema Biswas) who is literate, kind-hearted and follows the rigours of a widow's life with all sincerity. There are others who are more servile and none of these women can recollect precisely how long they have lived in the *ashram* except that they were very small when their husbands died. Mehta, in this film, exposes how a woman's identity is defined through her relationality to the men in her life – father, husband or son and if any of these relational links are ruptured then:

...she 'ceases' as a person and passes into a state of 'social death.'...her 'social death' also signals her 'sexual death.' As a widow she is pushed to the margins of the functioning social unit of the family and is alienated from reproduction and sexuality. (Mukherjee, 36)

The widow is the disrupter in the traditional society that legitimizes a woman's identity through rituals like marriage, and the same society creates rituals marking a widow's renunciation of sexuality in breaking bangles, shaving head, wearing white sari, eating bland food etc. These rituals mark the need to control female sexuality that, if let loose, stands to threaten the very pillars of the patriarchal society. Mehta, as a woman director, sensitively handles the discourse on widowhood in the Indian context and intervenes to represent different subjectivities of the widowed women in the film. She keeps the text of the film open to the audience's reception. There are inconclusive moments in the film that are aimed at provoking audiences' reflection and interrogation. Moments like the Holi playing scene in which Chuiya is dressed up as Krishna and all the widows of the ashram play Holi around her as gopis; or the scene when Chuiya places a laddu that she has bought from the sweet shop in *bua's* hand (oldest of the widows) as she sleeps. The aroma awakens *bua* and she swallows the laddu greedily, letting the taste revive the scene of her being fed a laddu during her marriage, which is the only happy memory she has in her repressed life; or the last

scene when Shakuntala carries Chuiya to a rally by Gandhi, who becomes the hope for not just political freedom, but also the voice of reason amidst conservatism in Indian society. Shakuntala rescuing Chuiya, by frantically putting her in Narayan's arms (Kalyani's high caste Gandhian lover), depicts a sense of liberation from the destitute life Indian society forces widows in.

Water was caught in lot of controversy like Mehta's *Fire*, it was embroiled in controversy even before production started. Mehta's portrayal of Hindu widows and their oppression in society was condemned so much that an angry mob attacked the crew in Varanasi, destroyed the sets of the film and burned Mehta's effigy in public. Despite these hurdles, the film was completed; it released in different countries and also received many international awards. *Water*, in exploring the sexual economy of the female body, exposes an ecosystem where bodies are exploited and pushed out (when widowed), but are reintroduced in the system through different channels. Importantly, Mehta, in her films, represents sign and significations of female desire differently from the codes and conventions of popular cinema created by her male counterparts. Deepa Mehta raises pertinent questions about bodies (female) occupying liminal and exploited spaces where protagonist women do not have agency in the beginning but as social boundaries are redefined and transcended (ex: when Kalyani rejects the social control over her sexuality and crosses the threshold to begin a new life with Narayan; and also when Shakuntala helps Kalyani find a new future and also saves Chuiya in the end from the oppression and exploitative life of widowhood), these women identify their agency and take control of it. The process involves much introspection and struggle but no melodrama as Mehta never preaches but weaves the story of liminal existence of widows who live like outcasts in India in a lyrical narrative.

INTERSECTIONS OF DISABILITY AND SEXUALITY IN MARGARITA WITH A STRAW (2014)

The next film text that I take up is Shonali Bose's *Margarita With a Straw* (2014) starring Kalki Koechlin as Laila, a girl with cerebral palsy who studies in Delhi University and later moves to US for higher studies. This film challenges cultural misnomers and portrays the unabashed sexuality of a woman with disability. Laila is a spirited young girl who, with hormonal surges, is discovering sexual desire, arousal and function. She is heartbroken when rejected by the lead singer of the student band that she composes for and is again attracted to a 'cute' boy, Jared whom she meets at New York University. She also meets and falls in love with a young activist, Khanum, a blind girl of Pakistani origin. Laila is enamoured by Khanum's fiercely independent personality and her positive perspective towards her own

disability. Laila also experiences sexual encounter with Jared and is confused about her sexual orientation since she is attracted to men but is in a serious relationship with Khanum. This film is a pioneering effort by Shonali Bose in addressing the intersections of disability and sexuality, and not presenting it as a deviant or abnormal phenomenon. Women with disabilities are seen as non-sexual, undesirable and are “infantilised as being always in need of control or protection” (Goyal, 2017:138). So while disabled women are de-sexualized, their sexual rights are believed to be absolutely a non-issue. It is these cultural fallacies that Bose’s *Margarita* ruptures and creates an engaging cinematic narrative around ‘normal’ experiences of sexual encounter and intimacy for Laila. The film disrupts myths about sexuality of women in general and sexuality of people with disabilities in particular. Laila is presented first as an individual with dreams and desires and not pathologized due to her condition. *Margarita with a Straw*, not even for one moment, indulges in pathos of deprivation in disability rather it weaves the narrative of sexual self-discovery with subtle humour easing tensions of intense scenes (in the scene when Laila tries to tell her mother, played by the ever graceful Revathy, that she is a *bi* meaning bisexual and her mother interprets it as *bai* as in maid). Laila’s character is a feminist breakthrough in Hindi cinema that has always desexualized women with disabilities (ex: *Black* and *Burfi* to name a few) and has focused on the “hierarchy of needs” (Goyal, 141) that are thrust upon them by their parents and society. Laila is not forced to suppress her dreams and desires, she fulfills her dream of studying in a US university and embraces her sexuality, be it when she pleasures herself while watching porn or takes the initiative to kiss (her first kiss) her disabled male friend and also makes it clear that she does not want to take it further and would rather ‘explore’ more. The film ends with Laila (after breaking up with Khanum and after the death of her mother due to colon cancer) going on date with herself, what started as a journey towards self-discovery concludes with Laila taking control of her sexuality and consequentially gaining agency.

CONSTRICTED SPACES AND CONFLICTED LIVES IN LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA (2016)

Alankrita Shrivastava’s *Lipstick Under my Burkha* (2016) is the story of four small-town women with secret lives that run counter to their everyday reality. There is Usha Parmar (Ratna Pathak Shah), the old matriarch of the neighbourhood, who has gotten used to being addressed as “Buaji” (Aunty) and has forgotten her own name and routinely gazes at a self-portrait from her youth. But in the four walls of her room, she reads pulp fiction and fantasizes about her young brawny swim coach. There is beautician Leela who aspires to be a successful entrepreneur and wants to go away from the confining small

town. College student Rehana is a Miley Cyrus fan and feels suffocated in her orthodox Muslim family setup. She takes off her burkha as soon as she is out of the neighbourhood. And Shireen Aslam, *burkha* wearing housewife and mother of three boys, secretly works as a door-to-door saleswoman. All these four women want to shake off the burkhas – physical, social or cultural, of their conflicted lives. The constricted spaces, that they are forced to breath and live in, epitomize the entire mechanism of how patriarchy works to suppress female sexuality and desires. The locus of this film is the non-metropolitan setup placing the unabashed sex drive of its protagonist women at the center. These women are portrayed as struggling to overcome their staid existence. Saibal Chatterjee, in her review of the film, says:

Their struggles add up to a cohesive whole because Shrivastava rustles up a blend of affecting pathos and humour and garnishes it with the glue of female bonding, creating in the bargain a truly engaging and effective tale of women whose woes are but the starting points of acts of courage and defiance.

Lipstick busts various myths and explores taboo reality such as female masturbation and marital rape. Shireen is stuck in a marriage of sexual exploitation by the cheating husband but she finds freedom in her job. On the other hand, Leela uses sex to live out her fantasies, Rehana steals cosmetics and shoes to live her dream of ripped jeans and freedom, while Usha, who has been deemed asexual, reads erotic books hidden in religious books to achieve ‘climaxes’ in her life. Alankrita Shrivastava’s novelty in *Lipstick Under my Burkha* is that she opens the doors and shows us a girl “dancing to music to let out the rage... a woman who is victim to her husband’s libido... an older woman’s bathroom where she runs a tap to muffle the moans of her desires” (Bhave, 2017). These are real, identifiable women who are trying to manoeuvre through their prosaic lives to escape into a world, a fantasy where desires can be realized. Shrivastava portrays how women’s everyday rebellions against *burkha* or conservative family setup or lack of opportunities for women in a small town are persistent battles than one defining, decisive war with a proverbial victory (Joshi, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Cultural contexts and traditional mindsets, in India, create manifold oppressions and gendered violence making it impossible for women to express sexual desires, dreams and need for intimacy. These films become site of subversion in cinema and move away from constructions of voyeurism and fetishism that are so integral to commercial Hindi cinema. Interestingly, the gap of almost 20 years between *Fire* and *Lipstick* shows notable transformation

in the structures of film business where big production houses are producing and distributing women centric films by women directors as well as the type of audience (women) preferring and rooting for such films. *Water* was released after two years of its international debut in India and largely remained a festival fringe. These powerful representations of female body and explorations of changing economy of sexual desire make strong cultural interventions. This paper studies the subversive cracks that these women directors create in the social and cultural structures of male dominated film industry and Indian society. These three filmmakers have explored cinematic machinery to change cultural representations of female desire and subjectivity in cinema. At the same time also empowering the audience (mainly women) to imagine and acknowledge new imaginaries of female subjectivity with strong sexual identity.

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