

Challenging the Narrative Rhetoric: Inscribing Her-Story into History

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Abstract

Historically the media has been used for propaganda, and censorship to suppress creative expression. Recently the presence of censors in newsrooms and on editorial boards served to highlight its misuse of the media, so when Alankrita Shrivastava's film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* ran into trouble with the censor board, it raised the question of whether it was mere suppression of creative expression that censorship aimed at or was it control of meaning. Structuralist textual analysis involves a close reading of tangible signifiers and signifieds that present themselves extra-textually in the form of myths and counter-myths which in turn reflect the ideology of their culture. The understanding that power structures lie deeply embedded in signifieds likened the semiotic struggle for meaning to the struggle for personal freedom. The aim of this research paper is to examine the various interpretations of female sexual desire at play in the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and why this poses a threat to patriarchal Indian society. Film reinforces images of patriarchy and its philosophies via the structure of a binary hierarchy, women being considered the other. The multiplicity of images and experiences expressed in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is, I believe an attempt to dismantle the binary hierarchy. By offering more than one woman's sexual experience, the film is a subtle refusal to be the other in the hierarchy. This research proposes to read *Lipstick Under My Burkha* as a site for struggle and negotiation between female resistance and patriarchal control.

Keywords: narrative, feminist film theory, female spectatorship, subversion

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“Who controls the past controls the future.
Who controls the present controls the past”

George Orwell
Nineteen Eighty-Four

Indian citizens live in the illusion of freedom/democracy. However, closer inspection will reveal that our basic freedom is curtailed on a daily basis. Regularly, political parties resort to moral policing, imposing curbs on the clothes we wear, the food we eat and sometimes even innocuous comments on the social media. Draconian laws have been revived, sedition and other laws have resulted in certain privileged groups taking the law into their own hands. The media readily covers these instances wanting to beat the others at breaking news to increase/boost TRPS often without verifying the veracity of the same.

Historically, the media has been used as a means of propaganda, and as far back as the early 20th Century, Soviet Cinema made use of films like *Battleship Potemkin*, *Strike*, *October* contained a political agenda. As a visual medium film transcends the barrier of language and possesses the political potential serving as an apt vehicle for ideological conditioning. As far back as 1915, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* was criticised for the fact that although Griffith created, codified and demonstrated a language of cinema introducing certain techniques which have become indispensable to modern film making, the film actually dramatized and encouraged the attitude of racism in America making this iconic film at the same time America's pride as well as shame. The Orwellian commentary in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on the role of media in society is a chilling take on the incredible extent to which individual and collective thought is shaped. The primary consequence of this media manipulation is the shrinking capacity to think critically. While *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presented a dystopian view of the media of the future, the fiction film is the one aspect of modern media which distorts images of women stereotyping them into believing that they are the inferior 'other'.

Few conflicts would have given rise to as many films as the Vietnam War shaping it into a compelling yet conflicting narrative. David Desser, Professor of Cinema Studies, wrote, 'Hollywood has made a significant effort to portray America's Vietnam Experience', in the *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*. Films on history as opposed to films set against a backdrop of history can be compared to bring out the difference between films that claim to reflect reality and fiction films that use a historical milieu.

Metafilms act as a critique of film making even as they record milestones in history. Haunted by the spatio-temporal finiteness of life directors subconsciously reflect the anxieties of each generation with films that document humankind's continual attempts to make a difference, to critique life within the brief span of time available. For example, Charlie Chaplin's films possess a strong political commentary while at the same time presenting a powerful critique of the introduction of sound into cinema.

The fiction film in today's world thus becomes a powerful tool to indoctrinate the masses even as it entertains. Mainstream Hindi cinema with its stereotypical roles reinforces patriarchal images of women. Strong female protagonists are few and far

between but rarely cast in a professional setting, directors choosing to portray them in a family setting. Female directors like Meera Nair and Deepa Mehta among others did make attempts to sensitively explore women's sexuality although sex as a topic was considered taboo and woman's desire non-existent: the female protagonist going from virgin to mother in one stroke. Set in Bhopal, a small town in India, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (Dir Alankrita Shrivastava, 2017) is a female-oriented film that reflects the undeniable control patriarchy still has on Indian women. The characters, ordinary women who remain largely invisible in Hindi cinema, are seen boldly looking for sex and even enjoying it. That it ran into trouble with the censor board is therefore understandable, but what perplexed audiences more were the bizarre comments made by Pahlaj Nihalani, Chairman of the Film Certification Board. Describing the film as, 'lady-oriented', he denied permission for its January 2017 release because the film supposedly contained, 'contagious sexual scenes, abusive words and audio pornography.'

A mix of humour and pathos, the film deals with the efforts of four women attempting to escape from their pre-ordained captivity: **Usha Buaji** is a fifty plus woman who experiences a sexual awakening, **Shireen**, an accomplished saleswoman who hides her job from an overbearing and abusive husband, **Leela**, a beautician, engaged to be married carries on an affair with a photographer and **Rehana**, a teenage girl who lies to her parents in an attempt to be part of the 'in' scene at college. We laugh with these women but feel for them as they evince a longing for life beyond the one each is trapped in. Shrivastava avoids portraying the world outside as a paradise and chooses not to exoticize the four women, keeping the story real.

The question that needs to be asked would then be why do men find women's sexiness hard to handle. Perhaps it challenges man's sexuality and in turn their dominance. Or does the fact that films sometimes cater to and elicit the basest instincts in man, bother them? It would appear that the display of woman's sexuality appears to evoke the Id the patriarchal structure acting as a reminder that man is no longer in control. The fear that such signifieds would serve to instruct other women who are otherwise subjects of patriarchy and under its ideological control, is expressed in the form of righteous anger.

The film fails to evoke pity: it possesses a powerful dynamism that is hard hitting in its acceptance of life as it is and at the same time is a scathing indictment of a society that turns a blind eye to marital rape, but doesn't think twice about turning the elderly *buaji* out of her own home for reading romance novels and possessing a swimsuit.

Setting the film in Bhopal distances the action and the experiences of the four women from those of the Metropolises. It is not uncommon for women living in Indian cities to live dual lives, referred to in my paper *Indian Woman's Search for Identity* as flipped Jekyll and Hyde: a traditional *Bharatiya Naari* by night and a bold, modern woman with the freedom to choose her actions by day. Reporting on women in the Marwari community, one researcher describes the experience of catering to her family's every need by day and donning a pink bikini, enjoying a swim and sipping tequilas by the poolside in sheer bliss when away from the prying and judgemental eyes of the family and neighbours. Generally living in large joint families, young couples often entertain with alcohol and choice meat dishes when the elders are away at their 'village' or on a religious pilgrimage. Upon the family's return, they consume

only pure vegetarian food, prepared without onions and garlic. Consumption of alcohol is considered taboo. Mumbai boasts of a thriving massage industry; masseurs who service up-market women whose physical needs are otherwise unsatisfied. In small towns however, the situation is quite different because every knows everyone else and prying is an accepted social function.

Usha *Buaji*, the 55-year-old female character brilliantly played by one of Mumbai's best character actors, Ratna Pathak Shah, experiences a sexual awakening at this late stage in her life. Ironically though this is not the real thing but through the means of a sexual fantasy. Having just discovered the hidden world of physical pleasure through romance novels, she gets into a phone relationship with the swimming coach, who assumes that she is a young woman. The act of reading romance novels, described by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance*, is a ritual wish to be cared for, loved and validated in a particular way. Whereas, in the West romance reading is considered an innocent means of escape, the reaction to it in the film shows that Indian culture is intolerant of such means of escape.

I have claimed in my article, *Peddling Fantasies: The Role of Bollywood Cinema in Coping with Reality with Reference to Madhur Bhandarkar's Fashion* that films with a strong female protagonist offer the possibility of a life without limits. This further becomes a fantasy that prevents women from attempting to find real redressal for the unfavourable conditions they encounter in the real world. On the contrary, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* juxtaposes the theme of women's subjugation against their attempts to break free, unknown to their families. Shireen who endures marital rape on a regular basis, is a successful saleswoman without her husband's knowledge. Married, with three children, Shireen's story is used by director Shrivastava to make a strong case for women's reproductive health. Advised by the gynaecologist to use a condom, Shireen doesn't let her husband down, instead she claims that in the heat of passion there is no time to think about using a condom. The reality is very different, the husband is carrying on an affair with an attractive, career woman but insists that Shireen learn to be the woman and allow him to be the man. Bold, outspoken career women protagonists have little hope of making a difference.

Leena the beautician is rejected by her fiancé Manoj when he finds videos of her engaging in the act of sex with her photographer boyfriend. Rihanna, the teenaged student from a conservative background breaks free by shoplifting for the kind of clothes she would rather wear instead of the *burkha*. She gets unwittingly drawn into an anti-jeans protest, auditions to sing in a rock band and gets drawn into having an affair with a fellow student. When her parents discover her alternate lifestyle, they resort to the simplest solution in their minds: they decide to stop Rihanna's education.

The *burkha* becomes a metaphor for oppression and the body becomes a contested site, the 'physicality of the body...frequently the only way for the subordinate to evade an ideologically constructed subjectivity' (87, Fiske). By opting to getting into a physical relationship with her photographer boyfriend, beautician Leena is making a conscious choice to deny her future husband her virginity. Woman's virginity in India is considered sacred and her family's 'izzat' or honour rests on it. Newlywed husbands have been known to reject the bride if she didn't bleed during intercourse on her wedding night. Marital rape becomes a way of subjugating women and Shireen silently endures this instead of fighting back. More than her placidity, is the shocking

response of the male spectators in movie theatres that screened the film. Most women I spoke to reported that male spectators actually laughed heartily during the rape scenes almost as if they approved of the same. These are not women who protest against patriarchy, they represent the growing band of women who accept the hand of cards life has dealt them but each finds a way of subverting it by living a dual life.

Film reviewer Ranjona Banerji criticises the film by calling it a feminist tragedy, given the fact that the four protagonists, 'do not speak one word to challenge the shackles of patriarchy'. Responding to this Sumanta Banerjee writes that though, 'their acts of protest will remain confined within the ambit of their personal lives and the secret chambers of a patriarchal society', their actions are perhaps the sole route to subvert the oppression of the prevailing system in their personal lives. I am inclined to support the latter's view believing that small acts of subversion create tiny pockets of resistance until finally the 'hundredth monkey effect' is experienced. Though Ken Keyes Jr's story of The Hundredth Monkey about social change has been challenged, it has been defended by Elaine Myers as a possibility when a large enough number begins to believe and follow certain ideas. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* signals the subtle shifting of boundaries and similar films will follow until society experiences a paradigm shift. In that sense the protagonists provide us with subjects, not in relation to the patriarchal centre but what the mainstream would consider decentralised problematics, the film succeeding in a narrative denial of female helplessness' creating a strong, transformative counter narrative. Increasing acts of violence against women bear witness to the increasing anxiety of man as more women, mostly in Metropolises are coming to terms with their own chance at freedom. It is because of this that I believe that, more than depicting strong female protagonists, films with women in subversive roles would help effect a shift in the way women see themselves and lead to their empowerment, albeit in a subtle way.

Structures are expressions of power and breaking these structures a form of resistance. Multiple protagonists with their own personal stories to tell are a subversion of the grand narrative and the structure of the film too is an attempt to break established film making structures. The actions of these women may be lying and conniving, but are much needed acts of subversion in order to retain their sanity. By their actions, these women appear to redefine the signifiers for themselves and others like them, thereby attempting to rewrite history which, in turn, will influence the future. By taking control of the present, perhaps women will take control of the past which in turn will bring about control of the future.

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