



Ab Munni to Badnam Hui Darling, Lekin Kiske Liye?: Re-Visualising the Female in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*

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Abstract: Films have been a major part of entertainment to the Indian audience. They can be seen as one of the controlling factors of audience action as well as a reflection of audience action. Through Bollywood's history and evolution, one notices the prevalence of dance and songs in films. One of the most prominent features of Bollywood films has been the 'item numbers'. As viewers, most of us groove to these item numbers without realising that many of these songs are not only sexist but also objectify women. Sexism in many of these songs is due to the lyrics being from the perspective of a man thus using a woman for a gratuitous purpose. This concept of a man's perspective controlling and objectifying women, called the male gaze, in an item number or a film at times does not support the storyline and its presence is merely for attracting male viewers. However, in the midst of such objectifying films, films such as *Pink* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, broke the barriers of male gaze and provided the female point of view and yet proved to be successful. Such films stood against the dominant patriarchal ideology and opposed it even after all the criticism they faced. This paper shall analyse the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* as a protest film that consciously chose a different discourse to highlight female desire and dreams. The narrative of the film takes several risks in questioning the societal discourse around female identity and role as well as reconsidering the male gaze.

Keywords: Male gaze, Discourse, Female desire, rebellion.

“Le zandu balm hui, darling tere liye

Munni badnaam hui, darling tere liye”

‘Munni Badnam’ from the film *Dabbaang* was one of those songs that got majority of its audience grooving. The song is such that its lyrics aren’t only sexist but also objectify the woman as a ‘zandu’ balm. Further, the aspect of consent stands questioned as the lyrics are such that they ignore the very desire/wish of the woman in question. One realises that even if she were to have been a ‘zandu’ balm as a matter of choice, why would it have sullied her reputation? Thus, we notice that not only is the line sexist and objectifying but it also closes every door of choice for the woman. Therefore, we notice that even though the language of desire often objectifies, it is the aspect of consent that stands questioned in this case. This brings to light the fact that a woman being a female is what actually curbs her social identity and poses restrictions on the same. Even though the female lies in the realm of the biological, it still affects the social being of a woman. It is because of her biologically being a female that she has to face the restrictions. Thus, we could argue that the biological hinders her social self. So, Munni is *badnam* not because she chooses to be but more so because she is forced or her consent is not respected. One could argue that such a sexist representation exists due the lines being from a male perspective thereby using a woman for a gratuitous purpose. This very aspect of a man’s perspective controlling and objectifying women is called the ‘male gaze’ by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema*.

In the midst of such objectification, films like *Pink*, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, break the barriers of male gaze and provide the female point of view. However, with the aspect of woman’s choice and consent one needs to reconsider the concept of male gaze. Therefore, in terms of films like *Lipstick Under My Burkha* wherein a woman director chooses to show certain realities about female dreams and desire in terms of masturbation or her sexual needs,

it cannot be termed as catering to the male gaze. In changing its focus from melodrama and love stories, the film celebrates women's sexuality and desires and stands firm against the patriarchal society, providing the female spectators a realistic view of their life and reconsidering the male gaze. We notice that the very title of the film presents the two opposing aspects of the lipstick and the burkha, the lipstick being a symbol of a female dreams and desire and the burkha being a symbol of the patriarchal society and its restrictions. Thus, it could be argued that the film in its orientation and presentation stands as a subtle mark of protest against the female representation and choice in mainstream film storylines and media. Highlighting the women's search for freedom, the film stands as a strong feminist film, portraying the reality of a woman's life and questioning the male gaze.

In choosing a discourse that reconsiders the male gaze, the film comes in opposition to many other socially accepted discourses such as patriarchy and specified female role and orientation. The film is presented in a manner that not only does the storyline contribute to its desired discourse but the other aspects of the film such as the choice of camera shots, lighting and dialogue also contributes to it. In doing so, the film re-visualises the female and presents her in terms of her dreams and desires. However, it could be argued that in choosing this specific discourse to put forth women's voice, the film also stands in tone with some of the biases such as the burkha being a symbol of repression thereby targeting a single community unknowingly.

The society defines the role of a woman from childhood through the supposed dos and don'ts imposed on her. Although a woman grows out to have certain dreams and desires, the society imposes restrictions on these desires. The biological identity of being female is moulded in such a way by society that it forms the social identity of a woman in that restricted space thereby restricting the choices she has. Every time a woman speaks of her desire which does not stand in tone with the socially acceptable one ascribed to her role, she

comes in conflict with the society. Thus, we understand that the societal discourse of a woman is mostly in line with the patriarchal language ascribed to her role and every time a woman or a discourse chooses to speak otherwise, it comes in conflict with this ascribed discourse. This highlights the underlying politics of choice that women usually face in the society.

Lipstick Under My Burkha is a story of four women from Bhopal which casts an honest, unsparing look at what it means to be a woman in India. Written and directed by Alankrita Shrivastava and produced by Prakash Jha, the film stars Ratna Pathak Shah, Konkona Sen Sharma, Plabita Borthakur and Aahana Kumra along with Sushant Singh, Vikrant Massey, Shashank Arora, Vaibhav Tatwawaadi and Jagat Singh Solanki in supportive roles. The problem of the four central characters of the film, Usha Buaji, Shireen Aslam, Rehana Abidi and Leela is that these women dare to dream. All four women of the film are guilty of following their dreams. These women try to escape their gender roles and dream to live a life they wish, break free from their controlling families and the sexist society, and take ownership over their bodies. Set in Bhopal, the film shows a city on the verge of modernisation with new malls emerging amidst old buildings but the outlook of people being as narrow as the old lanes. It's a story of four women in search of freedom which is told in an intimate point of view. Each of them fights their silent individual battles none of which are really visible to anyone around them. Through the roles of these four, the film dives into areas female desire, sexual desires of older women and the unwillingness to give in to forced sex without any voyeuristic or titillating perspective. Although the film traces their individual battles, it ends with a sad realisation of their helpless positions. None of them achieve their dreams and yet highlight the reality of a woman's life. This makes one aware that the discourse chosen by the film is quite in contrast to the mainstream discourse of women in films. The film shows female desire and craving for sex in such minute details that it makes

patriarchy uncomfortable. This is the very reason the film was also denied certification by the Central Bureau of Film Certification (CBFC) for being “lady oriented, [and shows] their fantasy above life”. Thus, we notice that the discourse chosen by the film brings it in conflict with the other dominant discourses.

The film is a narrative of desire and fantasies and how these fantasies of women come in conflict with the oppressive and conservative patriarchal society. According to Alankrita Shrivastava, “It’s this yearning for freedom (that women have) that I wanted to explore”(BollywoodHelpline 0:19-0:21). The film presents this very yearning for freedom through the actions of its characters. The four women in the film refuse to be controlled by the society or any male control and this in itself is a sense of freedom for them. Buaji for instance refuses the role prescribed to her that of an old woman attending religious satsangs and devoting her to a chaste life and is involved in reading erotic novels and fantasising about the swimming trainer. It is her who initiates the phone sex and further takes the risk of actually going and meeting the trainer which in turn gets her in trouble. The film unapologetically shows the scene where she masturbates which stands quite in conflict with the prescribed role of an old woman. And yet, this masturbation scene isn’t voyeuristic or titillating as ‘the eyes of how women are being looked at, is not for the purpose of male fulfilment or objectification’ (Shrivastava, 08:22-08:32).

The movie being women centric portrays their inner lives, and in a way questions the traditional roles of women. Konkona Sen Sharma in one of her interviews with Anupama Chopra, dated July 06, 2017, comments on the portrayal of women saying, “I don’t really know why people are so scared if it is a film that talks about the stories of women, stories of women’s inner lives. It questions a certain worldview and a certain point of view that is enforced upon us, that we have to behave in a certain way, follow certain roles”(Sen, 04:11-04:29). A woman, who is always tagged as motherly and caring, suddenly appears to be

sexually gratifying herself and this breaks the traditionally held belief of her roles. The movie in a way breaks the traditionally held beliefs of the Hindi cinema of a woman being portrayed as a man's mother, a father's daughter, a brother's sister, a husband's wife, etc. and boldly portrays her as herself, satisfying her own needs and desires. The movie breaks this male gaze of the roles of women and how they are metaphorically objectified by traditionally giving them specific roles. The female characters in the movie question these roles of a mother, sister, wife or a daughter, which are not in her. They strongly question the honour which society asks them to protect and take the ownership of their life. The film questions the idea of a woman acting like an angel outside the bedroom and a prostitute inside the bedroom. This is seen through the character of Shireen. Although her husband is highly regarded as a Saudi return in their colony, he holds such sick beliefs. The look of disappointment on his face when he sees Leela and Rihana dancing at Leela's engagement and the irritation in his mind when Shireen asks him to wear a condom, show his patriarchal mentality. Although he wants his wife to behave well and not dance around at engagements or work outside the house, he still wants her to act like a whore and satisfy him inside the room.

Traditionally, male gaze is looking at a woman through the eyes of a man as an object or something that gratifies his sexual needs and ambitions. This is mostly done with shots needlessly lingering around the curves of a female body, basically reducing her to no more than eye candy for the male audience. This gaze denies woman of the power and places her in a subordinate position. The film however, reconsiders this male gaze and presents a more "lady oriented" perspective. The film uses the camera shots to show men from a female perspective and yet does not use this female gaze for a gratuitous purpose. In the scene where Bua ji accompanies Chotu and Duggu for their swimming training, one can see the use of a mid-shot and a slow motion edit to show Bua ji admiring the trainer and yet none of this

becomes voyeuristic (*Lipstick Under My Burkha*, 26:34-26:56). The refusal of women to fit in their prescribed roles inverts the male gaze and presents a world through her eyes. This is the reason that none of the sex within the film seems titillating or voyeuristic. Usha Buaji herself initiates the phone sex, Leela herself shoots the MMS and enjoys sex, Rihanna enjoys dancing and Shireen is forced into sex. There are lingering shots around the hips, women do sexually gratify their needs, there are sex scenes, yet the movie is not gratuitous because it's presented as a woman's desire. According to Ratna Pathak Shah, "there is very little of sex in the movie. And all the sex that there is, is uncomfortable. It's not easy"(Shah, 07:52-08:05) This presentation from a woman's point of view is what makes such scenes uncomfortable and uneasy for the male gaze, thereby reconsidering the concept of male gaze.

Although the movie is a comment on the Indian mentality, the way the director narrows down the focus to one state, one area and ultimately to one particular colony by loosely connecting all four characters, emphasises the fact that this is the hidden reality of every woman in India. None of these women are chasing overambitious dreams but of simple pleasures, something as basic as the right to dream and breathe freely. The story moves forward with four protagonists and each of them fight their own unique daily battles which they hide very successfully from the rest of the world and are thus very relatable to most women in India. One of the reasons to for a realistic portrayal is the frank dealing with the sexual needs of women. Usually it is the sexual needs of men portrayed and the role of a woman is to satisfy the same and in doing so, her sexual needs go unnoticed. Even if the sexual needs of woman are shown, she is shown as a vamp or a whore who gratifies the needs of men which isn't always real. Films very rarely show that women have sexual needs too and this is what makes them unrealistic. Thus, a film like *Lipstick Under My Burkha* shows the sexuality of a woman from the point of view of a woman. The excessive objections and criticism towards the film show that these realities about women are not accepted in the

society. It shows that we as a society are not able to consume the fact that our mothers and sisters too have sexual desires and this is because of the overpowering male views in society. In one of her interviews with Anupama Chopra, Alankrita Shrivastava says, “There is enough sexual content in Indian Cinema and it’s always catering to male fulfilment. And the reason the Censor Board had objection was because the film was not catering to the male gaze. It was making patriarchy uncomfortable.”(Shrivastava, 05:28-05:52). Therefore, when a film finally shows a woman’s perspective it becomes a series of ‘contagious sexual acts’ as claimed by the Censor Board. This very choice of discourse brings the film in conflict with other prevalent discourses.

The movie explores the realities of a woman’s life. Although many people said that the underlying plot does not really make sense and seems extremely unrealistic, it is these subtle things which are not easily acceptable in the society that portray the actual reality. Indian audience being accustomed to young actresses as protagonists and old actresses in the roles of mothers actually find such realistic portrayal unbelievable and unrealistic. We notice that at almost every step the film consciously stands away from a previously known discourse to make a stand for itself. Bua ji’s character is the one criticised the most for being so blunt but it actually explores the sexual life of an old woman unlike any other movie. The way she hides her sexuality in front of others and claims to be going for Satsangs when she actually goes to learn swimming and at night when everyone assumes her to be sleeping, she is actually involved in phone sex with the instructor, actually shows how women are compelled to live in their prescribed roles and not live the life they want. Rihana, who actually wants to enjoy with her friends and party at times is compelled to stay at home and stitch clothes fearing her conservative father, again stands as a relatable character for many of the girls. Leela’s character too is extremely realistic wherein due to her poverty and mother’s obligations, she is compelled to live a life she does not desire to live. Shireen, like many rural

Indian women faces marital rape and bears it up without speaking a word against her husband. Each of the four characters highlights one aspect of a woman's life and in doing so presents different parts of the society.

The movie is not a success story of women but a way of portraying a woman's world from a woman's point of view. Alankrita Shrivastava who has also written the script claims, "for me, the title means that women have this pulsating desire to be free. . . they have hidden desires and veiled dreams, it's just that you can't stop women. . ." (Shrivastava, 02:17-02:38) and through the film, she presents quite a just representation of her views. Although a realistic view, the film does not show these women to come out successful and as strong characters in the end but provides a very symbolic end to prove their rebellious nature. The portrayal of women in the movie is such that it would be extremely unbelievable if the four women stood successful in their own mission of life. In the end, Shireen's husband knows about Shireen's job, Rihana's truth of stealing stuff from the malls is finally revealed, Leela's to be husband sees the MMS, and Usha Buaji's affair with the swimming instructor is revealed to the people in the colony. In the end we see that no drastic change has taken place in their lives but their minds have turned to be more rebellious than they were. The last scene shows the mental freedom of the four ladies wherein they help each other emotionally and end up smoking. They do not cry over their situation but laugh instead. This shows their desire and need to raise middle finger at patriarchy as shown in one of the film's posters.

The film does take number of risks to mark itself apart from the main steam cinema. However, in choosing a certain discourse it does fall prey to other ambiguities. In choosing its act of rebellion, it does follow other biases. For instances, if one argues the burkha mentioned in the title to be marker of restrictions, one understands that only two out of the four women in the film wear a burkha. And these two are Muslim women. Therefore, the film somehow uses the element of one specific community as a marker of repression. The very

metonymy of a burkha used in the title opens up the politics of the fact that the film in some sense targets one community and its symbol as a marker of repression. Thus, one understands that the very metonymical use of a burkha opens the ambiguities involved in the use of the term. This use others the Muslim community in some way and thereby enters a new realm of politics. Thus, we notice that in choosing a mark of rebellion, the film also uses other prejudiced biases. If one notices, Rehana does use the burkha for her benefit at the time of stealing, thereby marking this symbol of repression as an aspect of aid. This could be seen as a marker of consent that the politics of the film fails to address while addressing the aspect of consent in terms of the gaze.

One could argue that the film consciously chooses a discourse of rebellion against mainstream cinema and its portrayal of women. In highlighting female dreams and desires, the narrative of the film takes several risks in questioning the societal discourse as well as reconsidering the male gaze. However, in choosing its act of rebellion, the film does fall prey to certain prevalent biases. We notice that at every aspect of the film, the film carefully explores the dreams and desires of a woman and re-visualises the female. Alankrita Shrivastava's auteurist vision is evident through the film as the film stands in line with her idea of a woman and the portrayal of women in film. The four women refusing any sort of control and highlighting their search of freedom by breaking away from the prescribed role of a woman show how the film consciously aims of re-visualising the female.

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