



WOMEN IN DIGITAL CINEMA

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Abstract

In conservative countries like India, dominated by patriarchal norms where the mere mention of the word 'sex' is considered a taboo, a woman addressing her sexual desires and exploring her sexuality is considered unacceptable. With a change in times, though the subject of female sexuality started gaining representation in the literary works and movies, it was often represented in a much-sanitized manner, censored to suit the moral codes and conduct of decency defined by the society. Under these circumstances, the gaining popularity of the digital world and especially digital cinema opened a platform to freely discuss debate and relook at the varied notions of topics like female sexuality without the fear of censorship.

The Netflix series, *Lust Stories* which openly talks about women's bodily needs, her expectations from a man, the need for sexual gratification and the freedom to choose whether to stay in a marriage which does not acknowledge her desires, becomes a very important landmark moment in the attempts made through the digital world to give a voice to the suppressed desires of women in a patriarchal society. This paper aims to look at the extent to which *Lust Stories* has been successful in normalizing a woman's desires and the assertion of her sexuality. It also looks at the underlying politics that can pervade the web of relationships when a woman's desires take the centre stage.

Keywords: Female Sexuality, Female desire, Patriarchy, Digital World, Digital Cinema

The story so far...

A woman's desires can create chaos. Starting with criticism of Eve's desire for the fruit of knowledge and her subsequent act of consumption of the fruit, a woman addressing her desires has been seen as the cause of fall of man, or rather, a threat to the societal norms that define what a good woman ought to be like. In a patriarchal society, women are further chained by the shackles of modesty and submissiveness that restrict their thoughts and actions to suit the narratives of culture and tradition, constructed by powerful male figures in the society. When a woman is condemned even for the slightest deviant thought that can defy the patriarchal values, a woman addressing her sexual desires becomes something extremely shocking!

Women, however, had found their own ways of speaking about their desires, thoughts and wishes. This, for example, is reflected in the literary works of many women writers from across

the globe. Even before the rise of feminism that laid the strong corner stone for women's rights and equality, archaic poets like Sappho had openly written about her strong feelings of love and affection for another woman as early as in between 630-580 BC! The Gothic fiction genre which emerged in the 19th century England was another technique used by women writers like the Bronte sisters to subtly disguise the topics of female sexuality and convey it to the readers of the most patriarchal Victorian Era. With the rise of feminism, women writers further got the grasp to expansively explore the themes of femininity and female sexuality.

The Indian Context

The sudden equation of sexual urges to a forbidden, secret desire that must be tightly sealed under layers of 'samskara' hit like a strong wave during the British rule when the land of Kaamasutra was "sanitized" to the land of repressed emotions. From performing arts to literary works, any theme relating to sexuality, especially female sexuality, was censored and modified. While we have witnessed women writers like Kamala Das or Lalithambika Antarjanam writing about female sexuality and movies like 'Parinayam' 'Fire', 'Margarita with a Straw', 'Parched' or 'Lipstick under my Burkha', portray the same theme, these works have faced either criticisms for being controversial or the edits of censorship. Another option was to release the movies that concentrate on these themes, as an art or feature film, which limited the reach to the viewers. Visual media, especially films, that rose to become the new literature for spreading the notions of female sexuality was constantly under the scrutiny of the Censor Board that always managed to 'purify' such 'vulgarity' in movies and provide a version that suits the Indian society and its narrow minded values. But then arrived the digital world as part of the internet age and created a whirlwind of changes.

The emergence of the digital domain

The technological innovations from 1980s onward had started to create a shift in the conventional methods used for conveying powerful messages to the audience across the world. Earlier narratives in the digital domain also primarily comprised of concentrating on the verbal elements of the text, and navigation was enabled through hyperlinked words. The second wave of digital fiction which emerged, enriched the multimodal capacity of electronic literature. No longer were words so prominent, but graphics and animation are just as likely to communicate story content or be used as part of the interactive interface(Thomas, 2011). When cinema became a part of the digital media, things changed for the better. In India, digital world, that is free from the perils of the Censor Board, started to gain acceptance among the audience as well as the film makers. It opened up a platform for every filmmaker who wanted to convey something refreshingly radical, which would have otherwise been censored; the added advantages included wider reach at lower costs. The rising popularity of Netflix among the youth and access to free internet service providers like JIO, further improved the scope of digital narratives. Under this context, the topic of female desires got an open forum to be discussed and debated, without the fear of cuts by Censor Board. **Lust Stories**, an anthology directed by prominent Indian directors like Anurag Kashyap, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Bannerjee and Karan Johar, that was broadcasted on Netflix brought out a woman's perspectives on her

desires, thus attempting to redefine the notions of repressed emotions, love, lust, power, status and romance. Women thus found their lost voices in the digital world.

Women and the Politics of power

The anthology of Lust Stories begins with the story (directed by Anurag Kashyap), of a young lecturer, Kalindi who is in an open marriage. The viewer notices that the absence of the husband and the freedom in this relationship, and the narratives of her husband about his numerous short term relationships and exploration of his sexual urges, triggers her to explore her own sexuality and choose to have sexual liaisons with one of her students and a colleague.

While she ends the relationship with her colleague due to his inability to satisfy her sexual urges, she goes to the extent of forcing the student in maintaining a relationship with her and making him state that their sexual act was consensual, the meaning of which the student was even unaware of. The story shows a woman's perspective on extramarital sexual affairs and her insecurities which eventually turn her into an extremely possessive, obsessive stalker who ironically wants no strings attached because she is a married woman. While the character Kalindi decides to address her bodily desires, the very aspect of her choosing the student over her colleague shows the exploitative nature of hierarchy created by power. The ending of the story tries to subvert the common sight of a man rejecting his lover in an extramarital affair stating "pagal hai kya, mai shaadi shuda hun" (Are you mad? I'm married) by making the woman character utter those words. Kalindi is depicted as a woman who confuses the concept of exploring her desires with having someone to assert control over, which ends up creating a reversal in the male-female power hierarchy. But reversal of power roles interspersed in an effort to normalize the concepts of open marriage and female sexuality resulted in the portrayal of an exploitative relationship where a woman forcefully dominates over a young boy, confusing him and playing with his emotions. This further reinforces the idea that the people in power can always do whatever they want. Being in a toxic relationship is degrading to any human being. Exploration of repressed female sexuality does not mean oppression of another individual.

Women and the Class Hierarchy

The second story in the anthology (directed by Zoya Akhtar) narrates the life of a lower class maid, Sudha who has an affair, mainly of sexual nature, with her employer, Ajit. She feels betrayed when he goes on to have an arranged marriage with a girl of his status and class. Contrary to the expectations, Sudha is not literally given a voice in the story where she creates a havoc by openly accusing Ajit for whatever relationship they had between them, but she is portrayed as the subversive woman character who does not let herself become affected merely because she had a sexual experience with a man who did not choose to marry her and treated her as a passing fancy. Though she is shocked in the beginning, the act of her taking the sweets distributed in happiness of the marriage getting fixed, creates the image of a strong woman who does not regret her decision to explore her sexuality despite being uncertain about the future. When another maid in the building shows her a costly churidar that was given away to her because it was slightly torn, and states that it can be covered up and worn for a wedding,

she silently smiles and offers the maid, the sweets that had been offered to her which can symbolically represent her acceptance of the class differences and her decision to move on. While Sudha chooses to embrace her sexual experience as her own choice without playing the victim card, the story reinforces the class politics where people of the lower class are expected to accept whatever that happens to them and never raise a voice against the upper class. This creates a problematic bigger picture which normalizes the idea of the upper class exploiting the lower class people who are ultimately silenced. The privilege that upper class gets is further reinforced in the third story (directed by Dibakar Bannerjee), where a married woman, Reena, belonging to the upper class gets to explore her sexuality through an extra marital affair and use the same as a strategy to win back the lost spark in her marriage. The woman from the upper class is given a powerful voice while the woman from lower class is shown to silently move on in life as the most powerful way of maintaining her integrity and peace.

The Notion of Love in marriage and the Politics of Gender

In a society where marriage is seen as the ultimate bond that unites two people in an eternal relationship of love and respect, a failed marriage is always judged and often, the woman is blamed. In the third story Reena, a woman in her middle ages makes the decision to start an extramarital relationship with her husband, Salman's close friend, Sudhir. Though her marriage was a love marriage, Salman eventually starts taking her for granted, and merely sees her as a care taker of his kids, who was economically dependent on him. While running after money and fame, he forgets that marriage works on love, understanding and equal share of responsibilities. When he tries to assert his superiority over his wife by completely denying her of any identity other than that of a mother and turning a blind eye to her desires, she chooses to explore her sexuality and make a choice of freedom from those duties which are only referred to as the woman's responsibilities. The thrill of taking control over her life heightens when she decides to tell about her affair with Sudhir who adores her and could give her what she wants from life. The story ends with reconciliation of Reena and Salman after he is made to realize that she is still desirable to other men and deserves to be treated much better; if he does not recognize her value, he will lose her. Reena is depicted as a strong woman who lashes out against Sudhir when he brings up the topic of divorce and the impact on her kids and reinforces the idea that a woman's individuality must not be compromised with, for the sake of anything. Marriage and children are only a part of a woman and must not be seen as the sole reason for her entire existence. Married women also have the right to choose their happiness. The same idea is also conveyed in the last story (directed by Karan Johar), where Megha, a school teacher discovers after her arranged marriage that Paras, her husband, is unable to satisfy her sexually. Patriarchy teaches a woman that the most important thing in marriage is the satisfaction of her husband. Sexual relationship gets reduced to the status of an act for the sake of pleasing a man and continuing the progeny. The woman's satisfaction and her desires are always repressed which is shown when Paras dismisses Megha's sexual fantasies stating it as something that he cannot understand. Unable to raise the cause of her misery to anyone since it is a very sensitive issue in India, Megha unapologetically resorts to the use of a sex toy after accidentally seeing the school's librarian using it. She is ostracized when her husband's family gets to know of her deeds but she refuses to apologize clearly stating that, she doesn't find any mistake in trying to

fulfil her sexual needs when her husband could neither do so nor recognize what was going wrong. The final triumph of Megha is shown when Paras conveys his wish to be given a chance to try and please her thus rendering the powerful message that if women are brave enough to state their needs, then men would start recognizing the needs of women as important as their needs; it is her right. The story lifts off the veil of taboo regarding the female sex toys and reinstates the fact that a woman has equal rights to express her desires in a relationship. The first story in the series puts forth the concept of an open marriage born out of the admiration for an older man which is very different from the traditional ideals of marriage. On a whole, **Lust Stories**, provides different views to the institution of marriage and the need for a woman to be equally treated as an individual with desires and preferences.

The politics of gender creep in inherently in the narrative. Reena is finally depicted as a shrewd, cunning woman who uses her extramarital relationship without considering the emotions of Sudhir, even after claiming to be in love with him and manipulates both Sudhir and Salman (her husband) to get back the lost passion in her marriage. She immediately goes back to her marriage when she realized that Sudhir might not accept her after her divorce. This also reinforces the idea that a woman needs to have a man in her life, especially in a situation where she is faced with the huge debt on her father's head. The economic dependence of a woman on a man also arises here. While she is depicted as strong enough to strike at the right moment and save her marriage, the portrayal of the woman as the saviour for the marital relationship, even if that means trodding down another person's emotions confers to the belief that women should try to work their marriage out, by hook or by crook. In the last story, the women characters are physically objectified by making them look appealing to the male gaze. The librarian teaches Megha to wear a saree seductively. This further reinstates the idea that women's clothing is mainly meant to attract the male attention and if a woman has to address her sexual desires, she must dress likewise.

Conclusion

The themes of femininity and female sexuality have been explored in a refreshing manner by the makers of Lust Stories, despite the various pitfalls that have been discussed. It is also interesting to note how the female film maker has created the narrative of a woman's choice to explore her sexuality and move on without hard feelings, while the male film makers have depicted strong, decisive, controlling women as the protagonists who explore their sexual urges and desires, which further shows the difference in the ways in which a woman and a man understands the female psyche and addresses the concept of female sexuality when given a platform without the threat of censorship. The digital domain has finally managed to listen to the unheard voices of women.

The digital world is definitely a platform that provides a conducive environment for open discussions and debates on topics like female sexuality that are otherwise considered to be kept as a hush affair. The non censored communication of messages helps the audience to gain wider perspectives of various realities in life and also gives them the space to understand, analyze and contemplate on various subjects. The digital world, which is still developing, thus becomes

a promising space for open expression of ideas, if used for the right propagation of messages and thoughts.

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